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DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF HOW THREE  
KENTUCKY WOMEN ARE LEADING CHANGE

A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Christian Nicole Ryan

December 2016

DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF HOW THREE  
KENTUCKY WOMEN ARE LEADING CHANGE

Date Recommended 10/24/16

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For those who question the order of things and wonder disruptively.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Often I have referred to my dissertation committee as my dream team, and I mean it in earnest. When I arrived in Dr. Barbara Burch's office to express my interest in the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, she told me she'd been waiting for me. She has believed in me as a leader from my days of handing out compact fluorescent light bulbs as a GreenTopper. Thank you, Dr. Burch, for advising me through a research project that has taken both of us outside our comfort zones in the best of ways.

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# DISRUPTIVE LEADERSHIP: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE WAY IN WHICH THREE KENTUCKY WOMEN ARE LEADING CHANGE

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134 pages

Directed by: Barbara Burch, Jane Olmsted, and Kristin Wilson

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

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In this grounded theory study, I explored the process of leadership demonstrated by three women in south central Kentucky as a unique model of leadership: disruptive leadership. These citizen leaders seek to solve wicked problems, disrupting the unacceptable status quo by offering better alternatives. The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What does it mean to be a disruptive leader?; (2) What are the central concerns of leaders facing wicked problems?; (3) What motivates leaders to solve such problems?; (4) What strategies are employed to address such problems?; and (5) How can disruptive leadership be distinguished from other leadership styles that share similar traits? Using a grounded theory approach, I analyzed interview and written narrative and field observations for emergent themes to answer the research questions and to better understand the leadership demonstrated by each of these women. I identified four main themes in my analysis of the data: (1) Each leader possesses the capacity for disruptive wonder. (2) Each leader is engaged in the disruption of existing power structure and distribution. (3) In the process of disruptive wonder each leader challenges hegemony. (4) Each leader uses innovative and effective strategies to solve a wicked problem. The themes provide insight into these leaders' capacities, motivations, and strategies, and offer a foundational construct for a model of leadership in which citizen leaders challenge hegemony and existing power structures to build inclusive emergent communities that are empowered to address wicked problems.

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

This study is an exploration of the process of leadership demonstrated by three women in south central Kentucky as a unique model of leadership. Two observations suggest that this style is, essentially, disruptive. First, these women solve wicked problems by disrupting dysfunctional social systems, offering alternatives that better serve the community of stakeholders. Second, they do so from no official position of authority and with no formal recognition of power. Kentucky ranks 45th in the United States on women's health and well being on the National Women's Law Center report card, 48th for the percent of women earning a four-year college degree, and 18.5% of women over the age of 18 who live below the poverty line (Kentucky Commission on Women, 2012). These women focus on regional issues of health, well being, and poverty, challenging the status quo with a vision of something better.

While leadership has been defined in terms of traits, style, development, and many other ways, all appear to share the common base that leaders influence others (Yukl, 2006). This simple deduction inadequately describes the leadership of the women in this study; influence is secondary, almost diminishing, as a way to describe their work. They do not seek to influence others to follow them, rather, they empower others to become agents of change. Furthermore, an attempt to define leadership so narrowly is in opposition to the purpose of this study, which is to understand a type of leadership as yet undefined and largely unrecognized. Traditional assumptions regarding power and influence represent a leadership status quo that is in need of disruption. The type of leadership described in this study does not fit any of the established categories, nor has it been described in existing leadership theory literature. Characteristics of servant leadership, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership can be recognized in

these women's approaches, strategies, and outcomes. However, my observations suggest fundamental differences worthy of examination and analysis. These individuals are not formally recognized as leaders, yet they feel empowered to question the status quo and to work for change. They are citizen leaders facing and solving wicked problems. They do not affect change on a continuous spectrum but, rather, disrupt existing systems and structures, replacing them with innovative and effective alternatives.

This study uses a grounded theory approach to explore the reason and the way women negotiate their social structures to disrupt the status quo and to implement positive alternatives that better serve their communities. Qualitative data, including semi-structured interviews, field notes, and written narrative, are analyzed for conceptual themes that may lend to the construct of a unique and distinct theory of leadership: disruptive leadership.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the leadership development and process of three Kentucky women who are negotiating positive and significant change in societal institutions in order to solve wicked problems and to use this knowledge to lend to the development of a theory of leadership as yet undefined using a grounded theory approach. A new theory, one that describes leaders that affect change and empower others from positions of non-authority and that embody the skills and competencies crucial to leadership in contemporary and social contexts, can fill an increasingly glaring gap in current theory and research. Furthermore, a grounded theory, emergent from substantive examples in real-life settings, allows potential citizen leaders to learn from the processes and to be inspired by successes of three women leaders in

south central Kentucky. While solutions may be contextually dependent, approaches to problem solving may be applicable despite contextual differences. Through this study, I attempt to gain an understanding of the processes by which these citizen leaders approach and solve wicked problems in order to develop a unique theory of leadership appropriate to the tasks at hand.

### **Understanding the Problem**

In 1948 Albert Einstein, in *A Message to Intellectuals*, wrote, "Our situation is not comparable to anything in the past. It is impossible, therefore, to apply methods and measures which at an earlier age might have been sufficient" (as cited in Green, 2003, p. 52). More than a half century later, Einstein's observation continues to hold true; as the complexity of problems change, society is pressed to solve them with different skills and mental abilities. In 1973 Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the notion of "wicked problems" to describe public policy issues that are beyond difficult, seemingly impossible in their complexity. These social problems resist solution through even the most reasonable and thoughtful strategies. Rittel and Webber described 10 characteristics of wicked problems, including the following four, which are particularly relevant to this study:

1. Every wicked problem is unique – there are no template strategies or solutions.
2. Every wicked problem is interlinked with others as cause, effect, or sometimes both. Any attempt to apply solution to one problem necessarily affects another.
3. Wicked problems are human invented – social problems – and cannot be solved with science, logic, or deductive reasoning.

4. Wicked problems represent problems for which there is no idealized end state, thus cannot really be solved but simply made better or worse.

If social policy problems were thought to be wicked in 1973, then perhaps they have only grown more wicked. Issues of poverty, equity, education, and crime cited by Rittel and Webber (1973) are exacerbated by new and interconnected conditions of a global society. As one bears witness to the mass extinction of flora and fauna; the collapse of ecosystem services such as pollination and soil health; the introduction of human created chemicals into the air, water, and soil; a changing climate that is resulting in unpredictable and severe weather events; and a series of other changes that cannot be anticipated, solutions in the sense of desired outcomes or correct policies appear impossible. As Rittel and Webber stated, “theory is inadequate for decent forecasting; our intelligence is insufficient to our tasks; plurality of objectives held by pluralities of politics makes it impossible to pursue unitary aims; and so on” (p. 160). Unprecedented and often unanticipated connections among events, people, and places drive social processes in increasingly large, interconnected systems. As the boundaries of social systems expand, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify problem origins and opportunities for viable intervention, as well as to anticipate direct and indirect causal outcomes. The present situation is unlike any in the past, nor are the competencies requisite for leaders charged with solving wicked problems.

Leadership theories have altered in response to the changing values and needs of society. Parry and Bryman (2006) recounted the five stages of leadership theory and research, beginning with trait theory in the 1940s when leaders were thought to be born rather than made. The 1960s brought hope to developing leaders with leadership as style

as the predominant theory: leadership is based not on personal traits but demonstrated in behavior. Divergent approaches have suggested that leadership is situationally contingent, moderated by contextual variables, providing the foundation for contingency theory. The new approach of the 1980s focused on charisma; and the 1990s brought about transformational leadership, which continues to be one of the most broadly researched styles at present (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). The recent frenzy of scholarly interest in both transformational and authentic leadership has led some researchers to suggest that these are the significant theories of present (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Fusco, Palmer, & O'Riordan, 2011). Parry and Bryman noted that each new leadership theory brings a change of emphasis, rather than disrupting and replacing the last (2006). It is now understood that traits, style, and situation are variables that affect leadership, for better or worse.

In late 2015 Dr. Peter Northouse, the author of *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, visited Western Kentucky University and delivered a lecture entitled, "Leadership in the 21st Century: Trends and Theories." He described an intense desire among the United States citizenry for strong and brave leadership, and a collective dissatisfaction with current leadership and conventional power roles. Respect for leaders, Northouse explained, has weakened with declining legitimacy. Individuals who are positioned at the top of corporations, organizations, and institutions increasingly are scrutinized as access to information allows society to instantly be informed about personal and professional details upon which to make judgment. Consistent and concerning displays of unethical behavior, or simple lack of authenticity among high profile leaders, has led to a declining respect for political, corporate, and organizational leaders (Northouse, 2015).

In January 2014 retired United States Army Commander Stanley McChrystal was interviewed on Ted Radio Hour in a show entitled, “How do leaders deal with failure?” He described his failure of leadership when a reporter published a story alleging inappropriate and presumed off-the-record discussions involving the general and his team that suggested disagreement between McChrystal and the President and was “an embarrassment to the White House” (McChrystal, 2014). The story took McChrystal by surprise, ending his career and forever changing his life. He was forced to retire and remarked in the interview that he had yet to recover. Transparency is no longer a voluntary action for those in leadership positions; honesty and authenticity are critical for today’s leaders if they are to be trusted and respected by an increasingly scrutinizing population. This may be the reason authentic leadership is a strongly emerging theory in recent literature, developed in response to the needs of the time and the interests of stakeholders (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Fusco et al., 2011). Transformational and authentic leadership possess basic qualities that are universally appreciated: inclusivity and honesty. However, neither theory encompasses the skills, competencies, and strategies essential for leaders to solve the wicked problems of today. Honesty and authenticity may be essential, but these characteristics are inadequate; leaders in this new age must possess very particular strengths of heart and also of the mind.

Einstein warned that continued application of traditional methods may be insufficient for new situations, and a profound demonstration exists in the working of the human mind; the brain is challenged to keep pace with the rapidly changing environment. Homer-Dixon (2000) described the “ingenuity gap,” the need for solutions to complex problems and the shortage of workable ideas, as the most pressing issue at present. “The



simple mental models in our heads, the models that guide our daily behavior, are built around assumptions of regularity, repetition of past patterns, and extrapolation into the future of slow, incremental change” (p. 17). These mental models represent the continued application of traditional methods of which Einstein warned. They are inadequate for a new situation in which regularity; repetition; and slow, incremental change are no longer the norm. Our mental and physical capacities are overwhelmed as we face the floods of information received in steady stream through smart phones, computer screens, video displays, and radio, leaving little time to reflect or to discern fact and opinion. In such a context, the ability to process and to organize information into a meaningful knowledge structure becomes a fundamental leadership skill (Boulding, 1956; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). Bolman and Deal (2008) used the concept of frames to describe the mental models, the maps built on ideas and assumptions that are utilized to “register and assemble key bits of perceptual data into a coherent pattern” (p. 11). The ability to do this well, a process referred to as rapid cognition, is a key skill that allows for quick comprehension and accurate judgment of situations and problems (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Despite this, society is strongly reactive, responding to crises as they happen with limited capacity for proactive planning to avoid problems, or at the very least preparedness for problems that are anticipated (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

Describing the fundamental capacities of effective leaders, Senge (2006) included systems intelligence, the ability to cultivate partnerships across boundaries and openness of heart and mind. He noted that these capacities have been largely lost in the modern era; poor decision making due to the inability of leaders to see systems, and the interconnectedness of system elements, has led to significant problems. Senge provided

many examples, including atmospheric carbon dioxide levels that are 30% higher than at any time in the past 400,000 years, and more than one ton of waste is generated daily to support the average American's lifestyle. These problems have far-reaching, compounding, and often unanticipated impacts. Regularity can no longer be assumed; society must be prepared for the opposite by rebuilding social institutions for resiliency in a globalized society marked by fast-paced change. A single decision or action can have ripple effects that travel around the world at unprecedented speed. Leaders must be able to see the connections within layers of interrelated systems, and to determine actions that will result in reactions with rapid cognition resultant of flexible, comprehensive mental frames.

As past mental models are insufficient to carry us into this new age, the institutional models that govern societies, organizations, institutions, and other systems are also inadequate. The future leader must recognize that these models should be discarded and replaced with alternatives more appropriate to a dynamic, complex, and interconnected society. Turner (2003) defined social institutions as "those population-wide structures and associated cultural (symbolic) systems that humans create and use to adjust to the exigencies of their environment" (p. 2). Social institutions exist at a variety of levels and are interrelated and embedded within one another. Consider the institutions of economy, religion, governance, and education: core structures that have evolved over time to meet societal needs, the formation of which are driven by a wide array of forces. In early human history social institutions were relatively simple, driven by predominant activities of survival – hunting and gathering. Skills in these activities distinguished influential individuals, and rules of conduct were rooted in tradition (Turner, 2003).

Current social institutions are overwhelmingly complex, as stakeholders present different needs and goals, compete for increasingly scarce resources, and adapt to a global interconnectedness that presents cause-and-effect scenarios that often are unanticipated. The inclusion of all stakeholders, those individuals with various skills, perspectives, and talents, is imperative in the process of identifying problems and envisioning and implementing viable solutions. The conventional command control operating system that characterizes most societal institutions does not allow for those interconnections among individuals (and their environment) that are necessary for a whole and resilient social structure. Decisions are not made in ways that are inclusive of all stakeholders; rather, they are issued from leaders in a top-down pyramid in which the individuals expected to carry them out, as well as those most likely impacted, have little or no engagement in the decision-making process. An emergent operating system is characterized as a spider's web rather than a pyramid. In the emergence model, leaders center themselves in the middle, making connections with and between individuals, and replacing the missing fragments and adding substance to structure. Helgesen in 1995 first introduced the expression "web of inclusion" (p. 86) to describe the "organic architectural form more circular than hierarchal" (p. 86) and building from the center out. Helgesen's studies of female executives revealed that they position themselves at the center of organizations to emphasize equality and accessibility (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This structure, albeit informal, illustrates inclusive and community-based organizational frameworks. This interconnectedness is a ubiquitous theme in nature, replicated in the social reality as a web of stakeholders who work together to rebuild and to strengthen the structure of societal institutions. Alexander (2006) described an emerging definition of

leadership that is more inclusive, reaching "across functions and organizations and from the middle out" (p. 91). During the evolution of this new model, the emergence operating system, the existing command control model is disrupted, no longer meeting the needs of a changing reality. At the center (not the top) of this new model are the new disruptive leaders working to rebuild the broken connections in communities. Such work requires imagining and creating entirely new societal institutions that honor both people and place.

New leaders must not only understand that the status quo is no longer working, but also possess the ability to envision alternatives and the courage to bring them to realization. Even then it is important to understand that, though globalization has connected individuals, social institutions differ dramatically. Ordinary citizens who possess the knowledge of place must be empowered to emerge as citizen leaders, for these individuals are best prepared to connect people and resources and to have the personal conviction for a vision that is authentic and community based. Wheatley and Frieze (2011) observed that a common approach to solving complex issues is to enlist the services of outside experts. While well intended, these efforts often result in exacerbation of the problem rather than solutions. Examples abound in service projects performed by well meaning service groups that are planned and executed without understanding of the community. A personal observation comes to mind: the donation and delivery of laptop computers complete with educational software, to a small community in the Peruvian Amazon region. The computers sit idle, with dead batteries and no way to charge them in a community that cherishes every drop of fuel they acquire to run a generator for special occasions and needs. Charging the laptops was not a priority.

## Seeds of Disruption

The concept of disruptive leadership is inspired by Christensen's 1997 theory of disruptive innovation, which describes new technologies that upset and replace existing products. These new technologies are not necessarily better, but they are less expensive to produce and to sell, and, therefore, available to a broader customer base. While the theory of disruptive innovation is not universally accepted and is widely challenged (Markides, 2006), the idea of disruption of a status quo through the introduction of an alternative scenario has begun to be applied in other situations and settings. Christensen has applied the theory to higher education in his book, *The Innovative University – Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out* (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). The term disruption is not meant to describe a breakthrough improvement along an existing trajectory; it is an innovation that replaces the original product with that which serves a broader population (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011). In this regard the idea of disruptive leadership has evolved; disruptive leaders change the status quo. The term cannot be found in leadership literature, nor does any theory or formal definition exist. At present use of the term is limited to references in contemporary media such as trade magazines, blogs, and TED Talk Radio Hour interviews. In these contexts descriptions of disruptive leadership consistently include common characteristics and outcomes. Most distinctly, these citizen leaders are not simply responding to unsatisfactory societal institutions; they are fundamentally changing them with impassioned vision, inclusiveness, and empowerment of others, as well as innovative creativity (Bina, 2013; Godin, 2014). The earliest reference found for the term is a May 2012 blog entitled "Disruptive Leadership" (Yorkovich). In this blog Yorkovich provided

points that describe disruptive leadership including viewing problems in new ways, finding opportunity in unsolvable problems, acceptance of failure, patience for change, and impatience for meaningful impact. Disruptive leaders exist and, while characteristics of transformative, authentic, and servant leadership can be observed in them, their approach is fundamentally different in that it disrupts current operating systems, rather than affecting incremental change within them. While not identified as such, disruptive leadership characteristics have been described in recent literature focused on institutional and global change, disruptive technology, and social justice (Christensen, 1997; Homer-Dixon, 2000; Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). Hesselbein and Goldsmith (2006) described the innovative leaders of today and the future who are making positive and impactful change: “For they have not been content to plow the old furrows; instead they stake out new fields of opportunity, challenge, and transformation-new messages for a new day” (p. xiii).

### **Research Questions**

This research is guided by the following questions:

- What does it mean to be a disruptive leader?
- What are the central concerns of leaders facing wicked problems?
- What motivates leaders to solve such problems?
- What strategies are employed to address such problems?
- How can disruptive leadership be distinguished from other leadership styles that share similar traits, such as transformational, servant, and authentic?

### **Summary of Methods**

Leadership is widely identified by theorists as a social influence process: essentially, change incidents in which an individual influences changes in others or in

organizations (Parry, 1998). As a dynamic process that is widely contextual, leadership research demands a methodology that allows for an understanding of the broader social contexts, the capacity to examine the processes of influence and change, and the wide array of variables that influence those processes. As such, grounded theory is gaining support as an effective methodology for leadership research (Parry, 1998) and is the methodology used for this research.

### **Grounded Theory Methodology**

Grounded theory methodology of research and theory development has undergone an evolution. It has followed different paths since its creators, Glaser and Strauss, wrote *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967. In developing the methodology, the researchers endeavored to combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research to effectively advance theoretical and practical knowledge in the social sciences. The key characteristics include the following: theory is generated by inductive logic through immersion in the data; theory is based on symbolic interaction concepts (processes and dynamic relationships between people and their environment); data gathering and analysis is cyclic, using constant comparison and abductive logic; and theoretical sensitivity of the researcher is acknowledged and necessary (Dey, 1999; Oktay, 2012). It is important to acknowledge, however, that grounded theory remains an unrefined and ambiguous methodology nearly 50 years after its introduction, leaving room for variation in interpretation and execution (Dey, 1999). Remaining true to the foundational elements of grounded theory as described, I believe the classic paradigm offers the most appropriate approach for the stated purpose of the research, which is concerned with substantive context and social process as related to disruptive leadership. This grounded

theory study is approached through a critical realism perspective in anticipation (and hope) of discovering complex, and not readily observable, realities that may emerge as significant categories or themes upon which a theory of leadership may be constructed. This approach strengthens both the methodology and outcomes of this study and allows for the confidence and creativity to accomplish the work with sensitivity and respect for the participants.

### **Data Sources**

This theory is informed by various data collected from the three selected participants who are believed to illustrate a unique leadership phenomenon. The participants include a mother/farmer working to build local food systems to improve access, availability, and affordability to healthy food; a Kentucky native and director of a non-profit organization who uses a holistic approach to break cycles of poverty and homelessness through empowerment; and a birth doula who supports mothers through their birthing process to ensure they are informed about birth options and that the experience is physically and emotionally positive and healthy for mother and baby. Data sources include field observations gained through attendance at relevant meetings and events in which the participants act in leadership roles; documents (blogs, articles, editorials, and other written works of the participants); and a series of semi-structured interviews with each participant.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In grounded theory methodology, the data collection process is ongoing as the theory develops; analysis begins at that start of data collection. Constant comparison of data allows for the generation of concepts, which then drive subsequent data collection.



As the process of collection and analysis progresses, subsequent data selection is informed by emerging categories as interpreted by the researcher through theoretical sensitivity. Categories may be modified in light of new evidence and eventually become themes that may provide a foundation for the construction of a new theory. The analysis is complete when theoretical saturation has been reached and the data fail to provide additional codes or categories.

### **Significance of the Study**

I have observed three women in my local community acting as agents of change using an approach that does not fit traditional leadership theories or models currently described in the literature. They essentially disrupt status quo in societal institutions and systems by offering better alternatives. As such, I have identified them as disruptive leaders, unique in their motivations, strategies, skills, characteristics, and outcomes. These leaders may very well be the true new leaders for this era of wicked problems. If so, an examination of their motives, development, and strategies for navigating social structures to affect profound change is worthy of exploration for deeper understanding. While more than 350 definitions of leadership have been posited through decades of academic analysis and investigation, none have universally satisfied practitioners or academics; and a clear understanding is absent of the development, capacities, or strategies that distinguish effective leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 1985/2007; Ford, 2005). Past and present descriptions of leadership are unrealistically, and perhaps practically narrow; none encompass the leadership skills and competencies necessary today. These descriptions attempt to explain leadership in terms of limited and static variables and do not holistically consider development, motivation, dynamic processes, or personal and

societal context (Middlehurst, 2008). As Einstein expressed that problems cannot be solved as in the past, perhaps it is true that leadership cannot be explained as in the past. The traditional notions of leadership origin, development, strategy, and structure are ripe for disruption by a new type of leader in this new age. Theories of leadership, particularly transformational, authentic, and servant, include some overlapping characteristics of disruptive leaders and their motivations and strategies; they do not fully explain the phenomenon of disruptive leadership as observed in this study. While no theory or even definition exists of this type of leadership in the literature, situational examples exist. A grounded theory study of these women and the processes and strategies that have led to their successes leads to the development of a new theory of leadership distinct from current and traditional models: disruptive leadership.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The primary limitation of this (and any grounded theory study) is that the researcher acts as a subjective filter through which data are collected and interpreted. While this is a fundamental element of grounded theory research, it challenges traditional criteria of validity and generalizability. As an alternative, Kempster and Parry (2011) suggested the criteria of pragmatism, practical adequacy, and plausibility (further explained in Chapter III, Methodology). A new theory may not emerge from the data collected and analyzed, and the categories may fit within an existing theory of leadership. However, if the methodology and intent are followed, themes will emerge from which to build theory that is pragmatic, practical, and plausible to the context and individuals from which it is constructed. If the emergent theory can guide practice or can inspire continued research by other students of leadership, then this study will be considered a success.

This study is delimited to a sample of three women in south central Kentucky. It is focused on the context, the situational circumstances in which the participants have developed as citizen leaders, and the processes by which they disrupt dysfunctional status quo within various local social structures to solve wicked problems. Deep observation of this phenomenon can reveal some leadership characteristics and strategies that explain the way effective leaders can emerge from positions of non-authority to cause lasting and impactful change. The nature of the grassroots, community-based approach used by these leaders suggests that a local-level examination may provide details that would not otherwise be revealed. While examples of disruptive leadership, though not explicitly identified as such, can be found in literature, history, mainstream media, and even folklore and fairy tales from local to global levels, such leadership often appears to stem from efforts at a community-based level. For this reason, it is logical to maintain a focus on community-based disruptive leaders. As stated earlier, place matters. The place-based approach to disruptive leadership is an important factor. Kentucky offers some special limitations and challenges, as well as opportunities, for leaders. The leaders of focus in this study seek to affect change in local communities that potentially can serve as models for leadership approaches to change in communities facing similar issues. Finally, existing relationships between researcher and participants offer a level of comfort and trust that will allow for deeper and more detailed interview responses for a richer observation of the phenomenon. All of these characteristics - details of place, community, culture, personal stories that drive motivation, interpersonal relationships that allow for collaboration, and other situational elements examined in this case study - help to

describe and to explain and to gain understanding of the phenomenon of interest: disruptive leadership.

### **Summary**

Chapter II is a review of literature on disruptive leadership, wicked problems, conventional and emerging organizational structures that limit and support disruption, characteristics thought to be essential for leaders of the future, and leadership styles and approaches that share common characteristics with disruptive leadership. Chapter III describes the grounded theory research methodology, critical realism perspective, research participants, data sources, data collection, data analysis, and research limitations and delimitations. Chapter IV contains the narrative analysis of the data and description of emergent themes. Chapter V provides a discussion of the research findings that may provide foundation for a construct of disruptive leadership, research limitations, and potential for further study that may lead to a theory of disruptive leadership.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Disruptive leadership.** A consensus on a formal definition of the term “disruptive leadership” does not exist; however, common characteristics stand out in literature and discussion of the phenomenon. Primarily, disruptive leadership recognizes and replaces an unsatisfactory status quo with an alternative that better serves stakeholders.

**Community-based leadership.** Community-based leadership is based in place; responsive to community needs; mindful of a community’s goals, values, and vision; and utilizes collaborative planning and partnerships to achieve a common goal (Anderson, O’Loughlin, & Salt, 2001).

**Theoretical sampling.** The general procedure of theoretical sampling is to elicit codes from raw data through constant comparative analysis as the data are collected. These codes are used to direct continued data collection, from which they are further theoretically developed with respect to their various properties and their connections with other codes. (Glaser, 1978, p. 36).

**Theoretical memos.** Memos are the theorizing write-up about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding (Glaser, 1978, p. 83).

**Theoretical sensitivity.** Theoretical sensitivity is a characteristic of the researcher that enables theory to be recognized or developed from data. Theoretical sensitivity is based on the prior experience and knowledge of the researcher (Oktay, 2012, p. 153).

**Theoretical saturation.** Theoretical saturation occurs when comparison of new data elicits no new theoretical information (i.e., no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen) (Oktay, 2012, p. 153).

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study is to explore the process of leadership demonstrated by three women in south central Kentucky as a unique model of leadership. These citizen leaders solve wicked problems by disrupting dysfunctional institutional systems, offering alternatives that better serve the community of stakeholders from no official position of authority and with no formal recognition of power. Understanding the development of these leaders and the processes and strategies they employ in order to realize their visions will lead to the development of a new theory of leadership, disruptive leadership, which may be used as a model for developing or prospective leaders. Limited published research in leadership scholarship can be found regarding disruptive leadership. Presently the term is used in contemporary media, originating from the concept of disruptive technology and beginning to be used to describe other disruptions of the status quo. Theories of leadership, particularly transformational, authentic, and servant, include some overlapping characteristics of disruptive leaders and their motivations and strategies but do not fully explain the phenomenon as observed in this study. This literature review provides some foundational concepts and background related to disruptive leadership upon which a new theory may be constructed.

### **Organization of the Literature**

This literature review includes topics that may explain the concept of disruptive leadership as demonstrated by the participants of this study, particularly as it relates to the empowerment of citizen leaders, gender, inclusion of stakeholders, and competencies and strategies for solving wicked problems. First, it is necessary to provide context that may explain the development of these leaders. Quite simply, wicked problems exist that need to be solved. Second, these individuals, for reasons that are explored in this study,

possess the motivation and ability to envision and to realize solutions. As a result, a new type of leadership is emerging, essentially disrupting traditional power structures, organizational structures, and the unsatisfactory status quo. The terms “wicked problems” and “disruptive leadership” are relatively contemporary; these concepts are explored to the extent that historical background exists. The situational context within which these leaders operate is particularly important, as the participants of this study lead from positions of non-authority and informal influence. Therefore, it is necessary to review both the traditional and emerging (disruptive) models of the operational systems and power structures that govern social institutions. To illuminate traits or approaches that make disruptive leadership unique, commonalities with other leadership models are examined, including servant leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and gender in leadership. This chapter concludes with a review of contemporary leadership scholarship that has discussed newly recognized competencies, skills, and strategies in acknowledgment of new leadership challenges and expectations in light of the wicked problems faced by society.

### **Wicked Problems**

In 1973 Rittel and Webber introduced the notion of “wicked problems” to describe social policy issues that essentially are unsolvable. Wicked problems, as surmised by Rittel and Webber, lack clarifying traits. Often these problems are buried deep in cultural hegemony and are difficult to observe. Furthermore, a solution in the sense of a desired outcome or correct policy is impossible, made even more challenging by the interconnections of globalized society: “Theory is inadequate for decent forecasting; our intelligence is insufficient to our tasks; plurality of objectives held by

pluralities of politics makes it impossible to pursue unitary aims; and so on” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160). An example is the global food system, which is noted by Senge (2006) to be “arguably the greatest generator of poverty, and consequently social and political instability” (p. 37). As prices for agricultural commodities fall, food becomes less expensive and more accessible to developed societies, while lowering living wages for producers in developing countries. Multinational food companies drive the global food system, with profit driven by productivity as the bottom line. This model externalizes costs to producers, marginalized populations, and the environmental services upon which food production is dependent. How does society address problems that involve and impact stakeholders from the human societies that desire affordable, nutritious food and fair wages to the nonhuman communities of pollinators and microbial soil builders? Alexander’s 2006 description of the challenges faced by today’s leaders is daunting: “[they] are multidimensional; they defy existing solutions, resources, and approaches; they erode fundamental assumptions and mental models; and they demand new learning and creativity” (p. 87). These wicked problems require unprecedented leadership competencies and an approach that will necessarily disrupt the status quo marked by power imbalance, lack of systems thinking, and exclusiveness of elemental stakeholders.

The first step in addressing wicked problems may be the simple identification and acknowledgment of their existence. Artist and disruptive designer Kelli Anderson (2011) coined the term *disruptive wonder* to describe the process of questioning the reasons for the current situation, whether there is value in the present arrangement, and the way in which this arrangement may be deconstructed and reconstructed in a more thoughtful or



effective manner. Anderson discussed “things,” for the most part from a designer’s perspective; but certainly this concept can be expanded and applied to processes, systems, and endless other structures, both tangible and intangible. The disruptive leaders in this study have identified wicked problems buried deep in cultural hegemony; becoming invisible to those with more complacent expectations of the status quo. Furthermore, they are empowered and motivated with a toolset of strategies and skills that may set them apart from traditional notions of leaders and may make them uniquely capable for the tasks at hand.

### **Origins of Disruptive Leadership**

Disruptive leadership arose from the theory of disruptive innovation, which was developed by Clayton Christensen (1997) as he observed the process of product disruption in computer technologies. Christensen wrote about disruptive innovation in his book, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, and the term began to be used primarily to describe technological advancements. Disruptive innovation is “the process by which a sector that has previously serviced only a limited few because its products and services were complicated, expensive and inaccessible, is transformed into one whose products and services are simple, affordable, and convenient and serves man no matter their wealth or expertise” (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, & Soares, 2011, p. 2). The idea can be illustrated with the use of a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid is an underserved population that does not utilize the service or product. At the top is the targeted few that use it. An open door of opportunity to serve the large population exists at the bottom with a product that may be simpler, and even lower quality, but accessible to a larger customer base. As it is distributed to the larger and more general population, it can be refined and improved,

ultimately taking over the market share and disrupting the position of the original product or service. The most obvious example is the personal computer. Originally available to only a few, the product design was simplified to create and to provide a personal computer (PC) version that now dominates the market.

As the theory of disruptive innovation has become mainstream in the business sector (and particularly in technology), the term disruptive leadership is emerging to describe business leaders who encourage the process of disruptive innovation. The earliest reference found for the term is a May 2012 blog entitled “Disruptive Leadership,” (Yorkovich). In this blog Yorkovich provided points that describe disruptive leadership, including viewing problems in new ways, finding opportunity in unsolvable problems, acceptance of failure, patience for change, and impatience for meaningful impact (2012).

Profiling “modern leaders” in the winter 2013 edition of the *Insigniam Quarterly*, Sedgh Bina used the term and described disruptive leaders as “not just visionary, they are at work making sure a particular future is possible” (p. 2). She described characteristics of disruptive leaders such as allowing time to “build trust and bring people along – speaking with authenticity and operating with consistency and integrity,” and perhaps most important, to “encourage inventive and unorthodox action” (p. 2). The leaders interviewed in the article described disruptive leadership as a necessary and adaptive response to the increasing complexity of problems, the pace of change, and globalization. Recurring themes throughout the five interviews included courage to take risks, envisioning the future, open-mindedness, engaging collective energy, and reframing problems and opportunities.

Homer-Dixon (2000) developed the concept of the “ingenuity gap” that exists when a society cannot supply sufficient ingenuity to meet its need to solve problems. He identified two types of ingenuity: technical and social. Technical ingenuity is used to create new technologies that help to solve problems in the physical world. Often these technical ingenuities are disruptive technologies. Social ingenuity helps to solve the problems of the social world: “it helps us arrange our economic, political, and social affairs and design our public and private institutions to achieve the level and kind of well-being we want” (p. 22). Social ingenuity appears to be a common trait of disruptive leaders.

The principles of disruptive innovation and leadership can be applied to social systems and services as well. The women in this study create innovative new systems and services that disrupt the status quo by providing alternatives to a larger and previously underserved portion of the population. This concept, while not identified specifically as disruptive leadership, has appeared in current literature examining impactful and creative change in organizations, communities, and systems. Wheatley and Frieze (2011) explored community leadership in light of increasingly complex problems and diminishing resources in *Walk Out Walk On – A Learning Journey Into Communities Daring To Live the Future Now*. “Walk outs” are individuals who choose to leave confining situations to “walk on” to new ideas and possibilities. Walking out of a world in which problems are unsolvable and systems are dysfunctional to “create and experiment with new ways of working and organizing” (p. 9), these leaders are “dedicated, thoughtful revolutionaries who work hard to give birth to the new in very difficult circumstances” (p. 12). While the *Walk Out Walk On* authors did not use the term disruption, they described the

abandonment of unsatisfactory status quo to create new systems that improve community health and resiliency:

We have to be brave enough to explore our questions, to cultivate our dissatisfaction with the present state of things, to notice what disturbs us, what feels unfair, terrible, heartbreaking. We have to be unafraid to look reality in the eye and notice what's really going on. If what we see opens our hearts, this is a good thing, because that's where our courage is found. With open hearts, we can bravely begin searching. We can go into the world with our questions, carried by our yearning to find a simpler and more effective way to live life and to benefit more people. (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011, p. 14)

Not surprisingly, these themes - courage, willingness to take risks, and empowering others to engage meaningfully in affecting change - are found in descriptions of disruptive leadership in the business models described previously.

Wheatley and Frieze (2011) described two other concepts that are relatable to disruptive leadership: *scaling across* and *trans-local learning*. Both are contradictory to conventional business models. The idea of scaling across, rather than scaling up, acknowledges that solutions, services, and products cannot be one-size-fits-all in a rapidly changing complex world. Scaling across requires trans-local learning - this occurs when an idea is carried from one community to another, in which it is not necessarily replicated or scaled up but adapted, evolved, and grown in sensible manner for that setting and existing conditions. In this way, new ideas are intentionally cultivated to disrupt and to replace the old. Some parallels can be seen between the concepts of scaling

across and trans-local learning and the traditional and emerging structures of institutions, social systems, and organizations. These parallels are made evident in the next section.

### **Context, Operational Systems, and Power Structures**

Osborn et al. (2002) argued that current leadership scholarship is incomplete and largely ignores the fact that leadership effectiveness is dependent upon context.

Middlehurst (2008) called for a greater maturity in leadership research, practice, and development that acknowledges context. These contextual factors should consider the potential for leadership to be viewed as process rather than person (outcome v. trait), the position of the leader (designated or informal), cognitive causal links and dissonances, value differences, and situational and social constructs, among others. As context is an elemental factor in this study, it is necessary to explore contextual factors.

#### **Context**

Osborn et al. (2002) expressed that leadership is “socially constructed in and from a context where patterns over time must be considered and where history matters” (p. 798). They continued this argument indicating that leadership is not only about leader/follower influence, but “most important is the collective incremental influence of leaders in and around the system” (p. 798). The construction of a grounded theory of disruptive leadership, in which leaders navigate social systems to essentially disrupt status quo of existing social institutions, requires a contextual foundation. In this type of leadership, the individual and the context are inextricably intertwined. As will be demonstrated, context explains the motivation, shapes the strategies, forms the organizational networks, and drives the outcomes of disruptive leadership in this study. As Osborn et al. observed, the world of the leader has fundamentally changed: “changed

perspective is necessary because the context in which leaders operate is both radically different and diverse” (p. 798). Essentially, positional leaders do not work in the world of the traditional bureaucracy, and the disruptive leaders of interest in this study work more effectively outside and around bureaucracy to disrupt those very structures. Osborn et al. argued that leadership scholarship should acknowledge that individuals and organizations vary, that “leadership theory is part of a larger series of theoretical perspectives that specify the system, its boundaries, the types of criteria to be examined and the basic causal mechanisms seen to be evoked by the leaders, wherever they reside in the system” (p. 798). This perspective is included because the contexts of both space and place occupied by these leaders are elemental to a grounded theory study of disruptive leadership. Disruptive leaders are not positioned within institutions in the space traditionally occupied by leaders. Often, they simultaneously reside both outside and at the center of the very organizational structures they seek to disrupt. While place also represents a system in which leaders are positioned, it is profoundly different while equally as important. Place is the community in which social and cultural connections exist and boundaries are not easily defined as those in organizational structures. Organizational space may be defined by matters of the mind; place is perhaps better defined by matters of the heart. Discussion follows on institutional structure and the positions that leaders may occupy within these spaces.

### **Institutional Structures and the Spaces Within**

Turner (2003) defined social institutions as “those population-wide structures and associated cultural (symbolic) systems that humans create and use to adjust to the exigencies of their environment” (p. 2). Social institutions exist at a variety of levels and

are interrelated and embedded within one another. Turner described sociocultural structures at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of reality. Macro-level forces, such as population, production, distribution, regulation, and reproduction, drive the development of social institutions as basic contingencies of human existence. Meso-level forces, such as segmentation, differentiation, and integration, drive the creation of corporate and categoric units. Micro-level forces drive encounters of interpersonal interactions influenced by emotions, transactional needs, symbols, roles, status, demographic, and ecological conditions. Macro-level “institutions and their corresponding systems of cultural values, ideologies, and norms allow populations as a whole to adapt to the environment, both biophysical and sociocultural” (Turner, 2003, p. 5). As various forces exert pressure on institutional systems and their environment changes and becomes more complex, selection pressures are put into motion that drive system adaptation. Evidence of this adaptation exists in organizational power structures. The layering of social systems, as described previously in a pyramid scheme, parallels the orthodox bureaucratic power hierarchy (and interestingly if only coincidentally, the pyramid shape used to describe disruption in technology). In these command control operating systems - the traditional organizational structures that dominate organizations, communities, and institutions - leadership is positioned at the top of the organizational chart.

Osborn et al. (2002) asserted that hierarchy is ubiquitous in organization, with important distinctions among the top, middle, and bottom of systems. Perhaps this is true in traditional leadership scholarship; however, research has suggested that conventional hierarchy is being disrupted. In fact, even Osborn et al. proposed characterizing context as ranging from stability to chaos, recognizing that the era of stable bureaucracy has been

“displaced by systems seeking new ways to develop competencies and compete” (p. 802).

This disruption parallels the phenomenon of disruption in technologies. The authors described boundary conditions for organizational complexity in terms ranging from stability to the edge of chaos. This is the point at which context matters, as the complexity of the organization, and its location on this spectrum demand different leadership strategies. On the crisis and chaos end where Osborn et al. identified two essential leadership strategies: patterning of attention and network leadership, which collectively developed and shared patterning of attention (isolating and communicating what is important) up and across the organizational structure is essential for organizational adaptability in periods of crisis. As such, a theme of inclusivity and diversity begins to emerge as critical for resilience. Technological disruption occurs at the bottom of the pyramid in which the general population is found; it is interesting to note that, in Turner’s (2003) illustration of social institutions, the micro level is where interpersonal encounters occur. The command control pyramid model, in which leaders are isolated at the top and insulated by layers of subordinates, prohibits one from understanding and effectively acting within the social organizational systems and structures as they truly exist in reality. This explains the reason the orthodox bureaucratic hierarchy is being disrupted by a new model, the emergent operating system.

In the emergence model, leaders center themselves in the middle (positional leadership), making connections with and between individuals and replacing missing fragments and adding substance to structure. The concepts of position in space and place may begin to merge at that point. Helgesen (1995) first introduced the expression “web of inclusion” to describe the “organic architectural form more circular than hierarchal” and



building from the center out. Helgesen's studies of female executives revealed that they position themselves at the center of organizations to emphasize equality and accessibility (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This structure illustrates the inclusive and community-based organizational frameworks. Alexander (2006) described an emerging definition of leadership that is more inclusive "across functions and organizations and from the middle out" (p. 91).

Representing inclusion and consequently diversity and equity, the web of inclusion appears to be a preferable leadership approach; however, a problem exists. Gordon (2002) pointed out that organizations are not equitable social systems, the leader/follower dualism that exists in society's knowledge of leadership has been constituted over centuries, and this deep structure is problematic in dispersed leadership. Such a situation presents a distinct paradox, he argued, between surface structures (dispersion of leadership) and deep structures (orthodox leadership) that must be addressed in new leadership theory. In a study examining power distance and structural distance as moderators of speaking up in transformational leadership models, Liu and Liao (2013) defined power distance as hierarchical cognition and structural distance as a hierarchical line (as in an organizational chart). They found a positive correlation between transformational leadership and employees speaking up, which supports the theory of transformational leadership as an approach particularly focused on engaging followers. (Transformational leadership will be further explored later in this chapter.) However, power distance had a moderating effect on employees speaking up, and structural difference was a significant moderator as well. These results support Gordon's (2002) thesis that, even in a leadership approach that encourages follower engagement in

idea generation and decision making (surface structure), the leader/follower dualism existent in deep structures of orthodox leadership presents tension that prevents its dispersion. Perhaps a theory of disruptive leadership avoids this paradox if disruptive leaders are, by definition, citizen leaders with no formal authority or power. The deep structures that concerned Gordon do not exist in the context of disruptive leadership, allowing such leaders to empower others uninhibited by perceptions of authority or power. During the evolution of this new model, the emergence operating system, the existing command control model is disrupted and ultimately replaced by that which more appropriately meets the needs of a changing reality. Dispersion of responsibility (and power) allows for adaptability and in turn builds resilience. Interconnectedness is a ubiquitous theme in nature and can be replicated in social reality as a web of stakeholders that work together to rebuild and to strengthen the structure of societal institutions.

### **The Context of Place**

At the center (not the top) of this new model are the new disruptive leaders working to rebuild the broken connections within and between communities. Such work requires imagining and creating entirely new societal institutions that honor both people and place. Thus, the context of place becomes an essential concern in the development of a theory of disruptive leadership. Wheatley and Frieze (2011) observed that a common approach to solving complex issues is to enlist the services of outside experts. The recurrent approach to creating institutions and to addressing problems is to apply a common template or solution that may have been effective in a different time or place. Examples abound of these often well-intended but ill-advised efforts to standardize and replicate best practices, and difficult lessons show the way in which seeds that flourish in

one environment may languish in another. Place-based education is a pedagogical approach that situates learning within the context of place. Service learning models, such as The \$100 Solution™ and Earth Force™, use place-based problem solving as the foundation for teaching and learning. Elemental to this approach is the acknowledgment that every community has a distinct history, culture, and ecology. Effective leaders must understand that problems and challenges cannot be solved outside the context of place. Roy Bunker (2014), social activist and founder of the “Barefoot College” in Rajasthan, India, trains women to become change agents by teaching them a skill valuable to their communities (e.g., solar installation in un-electrified villages in Gambia). Providing them with a useful skill empowers these women as leaders, returning home to disrupt traditional roles and in turn to empower others. He stated in an interview on the *Ted Radio Hour*: “I think you don't have to look for solutions outside. Look for solutions within, and listen to people. They have the solutions in front of you. Listen to the people on the ground. They have all of the solutions in the world” (Bunker, 2014, transcript).

If institutions are indeed created to allow for societal adjustment to the environment as described by Turner (2003), reassuring patterns of disruption and emergence can be found in nature, described as complex adaptive systems by biologists. Why are these patterns reassuring? They weave an ecological fabric that is resilient and adaptive, which are essential elements for a global society equipped to solve increasingly complex problems.

Countless small quantitative changes in the nature of our technologies, in the character of our societies, in the size of our population, and in our impact on the ecosystems around us add up over time, to major qualitative changes in our lives,

communities and surroundings. ... [T]aken together, these small changes have produced spectacular results: they have raised the complexity, unpredictability, and pace of events around us. These trends in turn have had a huge impact on our need for ingenuity and our ability to supply it. (Homer-Dixon, 2000, p. 49)

Ecological systems do not resemble pyramids. They are webs of interaction sufficiently complex to be remarkably, elegantly resilient. Their interactive complexity, a network of organisms (from polar bears to red blood cells), communicate and cooperate to overcome perturbation by adapting and ultimately evolving to improved fitness for the present conditions. Every organism at every level has something to offer and places a crucial role in the process. The practice of looking to nature for solutions is Biomimicry. Leaders may find inspiration not in the litany of books claiming to improve leadership skills and effectiveness, but in a study of the organizational structure of a forest.

### **Shared and Distinctive Characteristics of Disruptive Leadership**

The women leaders described in the study possess the characteristics identified in the *Insigniam* disruptive business leaders article (Bina, 2013): courage to take risks, envisioning the future, open-mindedness, engaging collective energy, and reframing problems and opportunities. Are these qualities and characteristics different from those of existing leadership styles and theories? While many are found in other leadership styles, such as servant, authentic, and transformative leadership, several social, personal, and contextual factors differentiate the leadership of focus in this study. These relate particularly to gender, situational context, position of power (or lack thereof), and motivation and competency to solve wicked problems. The next section identifies some common elements observed in disruptive and other types of leaders. More important is

the exploration of conditions, characteristics, and outcomes that make disruptive leadership unique. While the remainder of this literature review consists of discussion of these topics, the leaders who are the focus of this research may better answer the last question.

### **Servant Leadership**

Robert Greenleaf introduced the theory of servant leadership in his 1970 essay, “The Servant As Leader.” He explained that the character of Leo from Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East* inspired his theory:

Leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant. It was something given, or assumed, that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was servant first. (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 2)

Arguments can be seen in servant leadership literature that the concept predates Greenleaf, as Jesus was the original teacher and model of servant leadership. Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) described Jesus’ action of washing his disciples’ feet as an “unusual twist of Jesus’ leadership . . . [which] redefined the meaning and function of leadership power from ‘power over’ to ‘power to’, that is power as an enabling factor to choose to serve others” (p. 59). The primary intent of servant leaders essentially is to serve first and lead second; the servant leader’s self-concept is that of a servant, rather than a leader (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sun, 2013). Sun (2013) argued that servant leadership cannot be described as other styles in terms of characteristics; rather individuals enact servant leadership as a result of psychological factors.

In a study examining the reason individuals engage as servant leaders, Sun utilized a socio-cognitive approach stating that, “such an approach recognizes that servant identity goes beyond moral cognitive reasoning and asserts that other mechanisms such as behavioral regulation and one's motivation to maintain self-consistency across social situations are equally important” (p. 546). Sun asserted that servant leaders’ cognitive and behavioral dispositions are based on the four attributes of calling, humility, empathy, and agape love; that the strength of the servant identity is measured by the strength of these attributes. Therefore, servant leadership is best understood in terms of a continuum, with these attributes displayed to some degree across a plurality of identities and diversity of situations. Sun used the terms “servant-integrative” and “servant-compartmentalized” to describe the degree to which the attributes occur across an individual’s multiple identities. Servant-integrative leaders feel the need to serve in every situation across all of their identities; servant compartmentalized leaders respond different depending upon the situation or context, demonstrating less need for consistent servant identity.

While servant leader attributes of calling, humility, empathy, and agape love may appear to be desirable in a leader, particularly in light of changing cultural values and a contemporary movement toward leadership that is more participatory and ethical (Rubio-Sanchez, Bosco, & Melchar, 2013), no consensus exists in the literature regarding the effectiveness of servant leadership. A servant-integrative leader may feel the need to serve individuals to the detriment of the whole (Sun, 2013). In this way, servant leadership is distinct from other types, specifically transformational and authentic theories of leadership, that share other similar characteristics such as leading from core values and inclusivity of followers. Both types are discussed in more detail in the

following sections, but the importance is in the distinction between servant leaders and the other types, a focus on followers' individual needs and values over those of the organization or community. Servant leadership may be more effective in times of stability when preserving the status quo is desirable. However, in periods of uncertainty a transformational leader who can engage followers through change and innovation may be more effective.

Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, de Windt, and Alkema (2014) described the difference in terms of follower/leader position. Transformational leadership is "highly visible and uses influence processes that rely on the leader taking the stage, whereas servant leadership is less visible and uses influence processes that allow servant leaders to be more in the background" (p. 546). While this description provides distinction between servant and transformational leadership, it illustrates a similarity between servant leadership and the disruptive leaders of interest in this study; these leaders are content to remain in the background. They do not seek visibility as leaders; however, their goals are more similar to transformational than servant leadership - affecting change by disrupting the status quo. Another commonality exists between the leaders in this study and servant leaders, the attribute of calling. While answering a calling is not distinct to servant leadership - many leaders would describe a life story or experience that called them to their position - it is a significant factor in the leadership stories of the women in this study. This is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter IV.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders are said to cultivate a heightened sense of self-efficacy in their followers, motivating them to do more than normally expected. Citing empirical

evidence that transformational leadership is more effective than other styles, Deinert, Homan, Boer, Voepel, and Gutermann (2015) indicated that “transformational leadership’s potential to address issues that are relevant in the modern, changing, and uncertain work environment is the main reason for its positive influence” (p. 1095). Perhaps this explains the breadth of recent literature on authentic and transformational leadership, which has led some researchers to suggest that these may be the theories of our era (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Fusco et al., 2011). Transformational leaders appeal to their followers’ moral values through meaningful exchange that ultimately leads to a shared vision of desirable future states that are mutually or collectively beneficial (Wang & Huang, 2009). This meaningful exchange includes four sub-dimensions: idealized influence in which leaders embody the vision and values they espouse; inspirational motivation, giving followers’ tasks meaning and inspiring through symbolic actions; intellectual stimulation encouraging creativity and innovation; and individualized consideration through supportive coaching (Bass, 1985; Deinert et al., 2015). Transformational leaders’ effectiveness may be attributed to heightened emotional intelligence. Wang and Huang attempted to better understand behavior antecedents and group consequences of transformational leadership in a study of 23 small-medium textile business firms in Taiwan. The researchers found that emotional intelligence, defined as “the ability to recognized meanings related to specific emotions, and to reason and problem solve on the basis of them,” was a predictor of transformational leadership and that emotional intelligence mediates group cohesiveness (p. 382).

A key element of the concept of disruptive leadership, as demonstrated by the participants of this study, is the emergent operating system, or web of inclusion,



constructed by these leaders within their social structures. For this reason it is important to recognize a paradoxical downside of transformational leadership that may distinguish the model of disruptive leadership from transformational leadership; studies have suggested that transformational leadership may have a moderating effect on the network building of followers (Anderson & Sun, 2015). While this research is limited, it provides a precautionary tale for both transformative and disruptive leaders. In a study of transformational leaders and followers conducted in New Zealand, Anderson and Sun (2015) found that transformational leadership, particularly the individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation components, provided a reliance on the social capital of leaders by followers. Essentially, followers are not encouraged to develop their own networks because they are able to effectively utilize the existing social capital of their transformational leaders. If both followers and leaders build networks, the web of inclusion expands, increasing the possibility of structural holes or disconnects between people and organizations that can be filled with new knowledge, information, and ultimately innovative ideas and creativity (Anderson & Sun, 2015). This is an interesting observation and worthy of consideration, if only to make leaders aware of the need to encourage followers to build their own social capital.

Perhaps a more fundamental distinction between transformational and disruptive leadership involves intent. While a focus on organizational change - the ability to articulate vision and the ability to inspire followers - are characteristics of transformational leadership, the need for change has been found to be a lessor predictor of transformational leadership. Rather, the strongest factors are interpersonal, such as practical support for follower development (Ross & Offermann, 1997). While disruptive

leaders are concerned with the empowerment of others, their fundamental goal appears to be changing the status quo in order that others are empowered through improved social organizational structures. Essentially, transformative leaders thrive on building social capital, while disruptive leaders thrive on changing systems to remove barriers of self-empowerment. This difference may be further explained by an overlap with another leadership theory, authentic leadership, in which a fundamental concept is the authentic self as an autonomous self (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Both authentic and disruptive leaders serve to fulfill an internally driven vision or goal, in contrast to the organizational goal that may be supported by other types of leaders. This concept of leading from one's core values is explored more deeply in the next section.

### **Authentic Leadership**

The construct of authenticity is said to be rooted in ancient philosophy, with the Greeks' advice, "to thyself be true." More recently the construct has been explored in psychology and in contemporary scholarship by social psychologists (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Authentic leadership is a construct in early development; however, recent attention to the development of a higher order, multidimensional theory, has supported the proclamation by some scholars that this (and transformational leadership as mentioned in the last section) may be the theory of this era (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Fusco et al., 2011). Similar to transformational leadership, authentic leadership may appeal to a public demanding greater accountability and more positive forms of leadership in response to repeated instances of lapse in ethical judgment by highly visible leaders (Walumbwa et al., 2008). As the theory of authentic leadership develops, some scholars have suggested that this type of leadership may be a "root

construct” underlying all positive approaches (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003) The following section describes the evolving theory of authentic leadership, its characteristics and development, and commonalities and differences between disruptive and authentic leadership.

Drawing from a comprehensive review of recent literature, Walumbwa et al. (2008) developed a definition based on converging underlying dimensions, perspectives, and definitions. They sought to validate their definition through the development and testing of a theory-based measure of authentic leadership, the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ). The researchers defined it as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, and internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (p. 94). In three studies with samples from five settings (two United States universities and three field settings from the United States, Kenya, and China), they tested the ALQ as a leadership measure; explored the authentic leadership construct as an explanation for variance in outcomes beyond ethical and transformative leadership; and provided insight into authentic leadership and follower relationships regarding job satisfaction and performance. The researchers found the ALQ to have reliability and validity but, perhaps more important, discriminant validity differentiated authentic leadership from ethical and transformational leadership, building a theory that is distinct in its dimensions and outcomes. The primary distinction is a deep sense of self-awareness that leads authentic leaders to choose roles that are

consistent with internal self-concepts and goals, ultimately serving themselves and their followers. Authentic followers are driven by shared core goals rather than an ethical transaction, as in other types of leader/follower relationships. Transformational leaders may inspire followers toward an organizational goal or for an extrinsic reward, rather than an internally driven conviction. Perhaps the concept is best described in this way: “Authenticity does not involve any explicit consideration of ‘others,’ instead, the authentic self is seen as ‘existing wholly by the laws of its own being’” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 320, citing Erickson, 1995, p. 125).

Parry (1999) observed that leadership strategies at times are not deliberate but rather, often emerge as perspectives gained through life experience. The dimensions of authentic leadership - self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency - are suggested to arise from life experience. Specifically, trigger events (critical events that stimulate personal development) may influence leaders’ motivations, perspectives, and style (Cooper et al., 2005). Therefore, authentic leadership theorists consider development as an essential element of its construct. As noted by Cooper et al., “authentic leadership is not like other areas of leadership for which competency sets might be acquired in traditional training programs” (p. 483). Development through life story is the state in which authentic and disruptive leadership theories may converge; these leaders appear to have developed and to be contextually positioned as a result of personal experience rather than through formal training or organizational structural hierarchy. This is the paradox present in the essentialist perspective of authentic leadership followed in most developing constructs. Some theorists offer an interactionist perspective, arguing that a true self cannot be easily

accessed or assumed to exist but, rather, the construction of self is an ongoing process developed through interactions, experiences, and the articulation (both in external and internal narrative) of those experiences (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005).

Ladkin and Taylor (2010) described one's situated identity as "how the identity becomes operationalized with particular situations and contexts" (p. 8). Therefore, a variety of identity images reflecting the true self, refined over time and through life experience, and the situated self dependent upon situational context contribute to authentic enactment, a term which at first blush appears to be an oxymoron. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that the true self both develops within an external context and is expressed in it; the way in which one interacts with others is essentially an expression of one's true self, or authentic enactment. This led Ladkin and Taylor to ask the question: "How does one create a leadership enactment, which in some way expresses something authentic about the self in a given situation, which can consequently be read and interpreted as authentic?" (p. 11). They suggested the answer may be found in the system created by Constantin Stanislavski, a technique for actors known commonly as method acting: "The primary source from which an actor can draw to create the emotional world of their character is their own life ... In an analogous way, the authentic leader must draw from the material of his or her own life" (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, p. 17). This perspective allows for some reconciliation of the seemingly paradoxical concept of enacting authenticity. Liu, Cutcher, and Grant (2015) further developed this idea, conceptualizing both authenticity and gender as a performance done by, rather than

embodied in, individuals. This concept and others are further explored in the section on gender in leadership.

Quite simply, the primary commonality between authentic and disruptive leaders lies in a fundamental element; the motivation to lead change results from core conviction inspired by life story. Perhaps the distinction lies in the outcome: the disruption of a dysfunctional social institutional status quo with an alternative that better serves community or society at large. With the possibility of the significance of disruptive leadership being in the outcome, if disruptive leaders are distinct not in their development but their ability to turn unsatisfactory or unacceptable societal systems and structures into that which is fundamentally different, of highest interest would be the characteristics, skills, and strategies they possess and employ to bring their visions to reality. Some answers may be found in recent literature concerning the competencies needed for the leaders of the future, which are the tools leaders must possess to address and solve wicked problems. These ideas are explored at the end of this chapter.

### **Gender in Leadership**

The participants of this study are women who are citizen leaders disrupting unsatisfactory status quo with alternatives that better serve their community. It is essential to acknowledge that gender plays a role in leadership and is a significant factor in this particular grounded theory study. This section examines literature on gender in leadership, which provides foundation and context for the role of gender in the examples of disruptive leadership of focus in this study.

West and Zimmerman (1887) described gender as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate

for one's sex category" (p. 127). Doing gender, they stated, "involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (p. 126). These normative conceptions are ingrained assumptions regarding behavior and action; when one acts in a manner that challenges gender assumptions, character and motives may be called into question. Essentially, individuals are held accountable for doing gender appropriately: "Doing gender furnishes the interactional scaffolding of social structure, along with built-in mechanism for social control" (p. 147). Leadership by essential and conventional definitions and associations with power and, thus, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, presents particular challenges for women in upholding gender roles for which individuals are held accountable (Levitt, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In their meta-analysis of studies comparing the leadership styles of women and men Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, and Van Engen (2003) described prejudices in the attainment and retention by women of leadership roles and in evaluation of women in leadership roles, which led to the dilemma of role incongruity. Women may not be selected for a leadership position based on the absence of masculine qualities associated with traditional leadership; however, a woman who displays those qualities while in a leadership position is met with negative evaluation and potential backlash (Eagly et al., 2003; Holmes, 2006).

Traditional concepts of leadership are challenged by the very existence of women in formal and informal leadership roles. Ford (2005) described the cultural constructions of femininity centered on emotion and masculinity centered on rationality, positioning men as more natural occupants of organizations (and leadership positions). Citing

Gerhardi (1995), Ford discussed the (presumed) need for “remedial work” necessary to address the ambiguity created by the presence of women in a man’s world: “remedial work refers to individual and collective strategies that may be used by both women and men to restore the (gender) order when such order has been disturbed by women stepping out of their feminine position” (p. 244). This explains the reason the majority of organizational research and literature on gender and leadership has been approached from the perspective of gender reform, seeking to quantitatively compare men and women in terms of equality and differences and whether and the manner in which such factors can be overcome (Kark, 2004). Research resulting from a gender reform platform may have provided important information, suggesting that women are more likely to demonstrate transformational leadership style through inclusiveness of stakeholders; it has not provided an understanding of the reason this is the case or insight into the mechanisms driving these differences. These “women-in-management” studies have focused primarily on leadership style and simply inserted gender as a quantitative factor, giving little consideration to the deeper and more complex concepts of gender and gendering in leadership (Kark, 2004).

The gender resistance concept, that does not seek equality but, rather, acknowledges the differences between men and women, provides an alternative approach to the study of women and leadership (Kark, 2004). This perspective has led to qualitative studies that have examined the way the unique experiences of women and qualities identified as feminine may lead to a leadership style that is more sensitive, inclusive, and nurturing; women’s ways of knowing have led to “women’s ways of leading,” which may be advantageous in certain organizational settings (Kark, 2004).



However, such an approach begs the following consideration: Is the promotion of a female advantage a reinforcement of the constructs that lead to sex imbalance? If the goal is to remove the gender assumptions that restrict, such concepts as “women’s ways of leading” appear to counter that notion. Additionally, the gender resistance perspective assumes feminine norms (specifically white, middle class women), essentially ignoring individuals who fall outside of these norms as a result of experience, culture, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Kark, 2004).

Perhaps the ideal is represented by gender rebellion theory, which suggests the abandonment of female difference or advantage and the disruption of the very notion of gender order and dual categories. While this perspective acknowledges socially constructed asymmetrical power relations, it also acknowledges the shifting fluidity of sexuality and gender that assumes different forms while intersecting with other social categories and contexts (Kark, 2004). Theories of leadership, as well as research on leadership and the measures by which leadership is accomplished and considered effective, are masculine in their conceptions and design (Holmes, 2006). While limited organizational and leadership research can be found from the gender rebellion perspective, the gendered nature of existing organizational and leadership theory is beginning to be analyzed and questioned, “revealing the ways in which the theories privilege stereotypically masculine attributes and demonstrating how the gendered assumptions underlying theories can limit our understanding” (Kark, 2004, p. 171). The deconstruction of such assumptions is in itself a process of disruption of an existing status quo in organizational and leadership theory and practice.

The disruptive women leaders in this study do not endeavor to gender rebellion (directly) and do not necessarily identify as feminists. However, they are challenged by constructs of gender and find themselves both uniquely equipped and constrained to envision and to affect the change they desire. They negotiate social gender constructs in every interaction and with every action they take, sometimes with great intention and skill and other times blundering. However, a reconceptualization of power and leadership lies at the nexus of gender theories and disruptive leadership. This is further advanced by contemporary ideas regarding the competencies for the leaders of the future, which are examined in the next section.

### **The Leader of the Future**

The leadership theories described in this literature review encompass a variety of characteristics, skills, and strategies that are thought to develop effective leaders. However, none adequately describe the characteristics of the disruptive leaders in this study. Certain commonalities are significant: the emotional intelligence thought to make transformational leaders successful in their ability to meaningfully engage followers, the life story development and core convictions that drive authentic leaders, the desire to serve by servant leaders, and the notion that social constructions of gender serve only to limit leadership potential in both women and men. To simply combine these characteristics into a distinct new theory of leadership is insufficient. Disruptive leaders possess additional skills and characteristics that are not described in traditional theories but are beginning to be recognized as essential for leadership in the current era and into the future. Some contemporary thought leaders have provided ideas about the leaders of the future.

## **A Changing Definition of Leadership**

The definition of leadership is said to be changing. John Alexander (2006), president of the Center for Creative Leadership (CLL), stated that “this phenomenon is connected to the rise of complex challenges, those for which no pre-existing solutions or expertise exist” (p. 85). The CLL has developed an emerging definition of leadership emphasizing an emergent structure and a collective activity in which members set direction, build commitment, and create alignment. This inclusiveness, tapping into a collective that offers a diversity of skills, competencies, and ideas, is a recurring theme in literature on future leaders. Certainly this is a central premise in the leadership style and approach of the disruptive leaders of focus in this study. However, this is not a complete definition of leadership and provides little indication of the personal characteristics or competencies a leader needs to facilitate the process of emergent leadership or deep, disruptive change. Senge (2006) offered some insight: “The fundamentals [of sound leadership] start with a set of deep capacities with which few in leadership positions today to claim to be adept: systems intelligence, building partnerships across boundaries, and openness on three levels: head, heart and will” (p. 38). Each capacity is worth examining more closely, as the disruptive leaders in this study embody all of these traits.

### **Systems Intelligence**

In discussing systems intelligence, Senge (2006) described two particular systems thinking skills: the ability to see patterns of interdependency and the ability to see into the future. The ability to see patterns allows one to see the forces driving the system and, ultimately, where it is headed if the status quo is maintained. The inability of present leaders to see and to understand these systems results in failure of foresight and

increasingly complicated consequences. In stable conditions with low levels of complexity, the classical notions of linear causality and predictability may have been sufficient for solving routine problems. However, in conditions that fall on the chaos end of the spectrum described by Osborn et al. (2002), the tools needed to solve problems are fundamentally different. Heifetz (2006) proposed that a new understanding of leadership, different from the notion that leadership is the ability to influence and to gain followers, can be anchored by context. It is of limited value to study leadership practice in organizations or institutions unchallenged by need for adaptation or innovation; leadership becomes relevant in instances of adaptive challenges when change is necessary for resilience and survival. An adaptive challenge “calls into question fundamental assumptions and beliefs, sprawls across organizational boundaries, and surfaces divergent and opposing points of view” (Alexander, 2006, p. 89). These descriptions by Senge, Alexander, and other thought leaders on the competencies necessary for future leaders are remarkably similar to Anderson’s (2011) description of disruptive wonder. Adaptive challenges essentially are wicked problems. These problems, in which the causes and solutions are complex, require new methods of working and require collaboration between the individuals and groups who traditionally would not have been considered partners. In such context, leaders do not need followers but, rather, collaborators.

### **Partnership Across Boundaries**

Wicked problems are a result of the pluralities of interests and diversity of effected stakeholders. A single interested individual or group cannot solve wicked problems in isolation. Leaders must cultivate relationships, even beyond the current

partnerships, which by nature are more transactional than transformational. As Senge (2006) observed, these interactions are generally about negotiation to achieve individual goals. Furthermore, these disingenuous partnerships include only those stakeholders with power of voice. Inclusion of the voices of the periphery, those who may have different views but have a stake in both the problem and the outcome, is an increasingly crucial leadership skill. Thomas (2006) called on leaders to rethink the concept of diversity, as current constructs are limited to representation and relationships rather than diversity. He indicated that diversity refers to “the differences, similarities, and tensions that can and do exist between the elements of these different mixtures of people” (p. 49). Helgesen (2006) added to this idea of a more expansive definition of diversity that “admits the extreme variety in opinion and outlook ... [that] reflects the rich and challenging diversity of opinion we find in our larger society, where people are ever-more fiercely divided along political, religious, ideological, sectarian, economic, and social lines” (p. 189). Considering diversity from a broader perspective helps to show that Thomas’s points that representation (numbers) and relationships (focused on awareness and sensitivity) sell diversity short. These constructs are limiting and new leaders will need to learn the craft of “diversity management” and master it to “diversity maturity” (Thomas, 2006, pp. 49-51). The distinction comes with understanding the complexity created by diverse mixtures of people beyond race and gender and becoming comfortable with the tensions and complexities that are reality in a globalized society.

### **Openness of Head, Heart, and Will**

The solutions to wicked problems are difficult and elusive, and leaders must be the first to acknowledge that they have only some of the right answers. Openness to ideas

that result from perspectives and points of view that challenge their own is crucial in developing a shared vision and strategies for realizing that vision (Senge, 2006). This openness challenges the traditional notion of leaders who develop and communicate vision in an effort to influence followers. Adopting openness requires practice and is uncomfortable in many instances when stakeholders express concerns and visions that do not align with those of the leader. This may be made easier by openness of heart described by Senge (2006). Openness of heart, he explained, means becoming vulnerable and understanding how that society is a part of the problem. An example of this is the issue of climate change. It is difficult to acknowledge that everyone contributes to the problem each time they drive or use electricity. However, a failure to see the way in which individuals (and leaders) contribute to the very problems they seek to solve is a failure in systems thinking and ultimately prohibits them from intentionally, meaningfully, and successfully finding solutions. Opening of the heart, a willingness to see oneself as an integral part of the dysfunctional system, leads to opening of the will, which “involves discovering that our deepest commitments arise almost despite ourselves” (Senge, 2006, p. 42). At this point individuals let go of “self” and find their purpose. These concepts may appear to be abstract and even “new age,” but Senge (2006) remarked that “the subtle developmental processes behind these three openings have been understood for a very long while, and the loss of them may be a major reason we now struggle” (p. 43). He described Confucius’ “seven meditative spaces” through which developing leaders must pass to release old identities and perceptions and ideas that may be restraining, and must arrive at a place of stillness and peace in which thinking is unobscured. The Seven Meditations, described in “The Great Learning” (said to be

written 2400 years ago by the grandson of Confucius), can and have been interpreted in various ways. However, the overall intent is for leaders to work through a process of “becoming human” in order to truly understand the world, to help society, and to achieve a higher state (Huai, 1999). Confucius and the women in this study may provide an obvious beginning point for the construction of a theory of disruptive leadership - being human and, thus, relational, authentic, and emotionally intelligent.

The dimensions of disruptive leadership are explored in Chapter IV as they emerge from data analysis. These dimensions, along with the foundational groundwork provided by existing literature reviewed in this chapter, provide the foundation for a construct for the theory of disruptive leadership. This theory is discussed further in Chapter V, which concludes with recommendations for further research.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

This study explored the process of leadership demonstrated by three women in south central Kentucky as a unique model of leadership. Two observations suggested that this leadership is, essentially, disruptive. First, these women solve wicked problems by disrupting dysfunctional institutional systems, offering alternatives that better serve the community of stakeholders. Second, they do so from no official position of authority and with no formal recognition of power. Understanding the development of these citizen leaders and the processes and strategies they employ in order to realize their visions will lead to the development of a new theory of leadership, disruptive leadership, which may be used as a model for developing or prospective leaders. As such, grounded theory methodology was utilized, which is a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews, field observations, and narrative documents that are analyzed through a constant comparative method to identify emerging concepts or categories from which a substantive theory can be generated (Creswell, 1998; Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interaction theory, which is concerned with the interactions between individuals and their environment (Oktay, 2012). The participants of the study included a mother/farmer working to build local food systems to improve access, availability, and affordability to healthy food providing choices for consumers and opportunity for farmers; a Kentucky native and director of a non-profit organization who uses a holistic approach to break cycles of poverty and homelessness through empowerment and inclusion; and a birth doula working to ensure that mothers are informed about birth options, that they have real birth choices and control over their birth experiences, and that the experience is physically and emotionally positive and



healthy for mother and baby. In each case the participant interacts with, and within, their environment (community, stakeholders, and social and institutional structures) to lead significant change that addresses the needs of their community. The nature of this interaction is of particular interest, as it demonstrates unique processes and strategies from which one can extract useful lessons and tools that can potentially be utilized by citizen leaders to solve complex, systemic problems and to affect positive change. Using thematic analysis methodology, narrative data (personal interviews, field observations, and text documents) were analyzed for themes to explain the strategies, motivations, challenges, and characteristics of the participants. The context, combination, and level of success of these citizen leaders suggest a unique type of leadership and lend to a new definition distinct from traditional theories described in current literature.

### **Research Questions**

As is the nature of a grounded theory study, the research questions evolved as I collected, analyzed, and reflected on the narrative data. While I suspected I was observing a unique approach to, and style of leadership, it was not until I began my research that the elements and characteristics that make these women's approach both distinct and effective began to emerge. The original research questions became more focused as the participants' stories directed me to an understanding of the importance of motivation and process in the context of their work. Originally, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be a disruptive leader?
2. What are the central concerns of leaders facing wicked problems?
3. What motivates leaders to solve such problems?

4. What strategies are employed to address such problems?
5. How can disruptive leadership be distinguished from other leadership styles that share similar traits, such as transformational, servant, and authentic?

It became clear in the process that the two most important questions concerned the motivation to confront the status quo, to challenge hegemony considered to be unacceptable, and to envision an alternative that better serves communities and the process by which the women approached and ultimately solved wicked problems. These factors make the leadership of interest in this study unique, and the responses to these questions helped to answer the others.

### **Summary of Methods**

Leadership is widely identified by theorists as a social influence process, essentially change incidents in which an individual influences changes in others or in organizations (Parry, 1998). As a dynamic process that is widely contextual, leadership research demands a methodology that allows for an understanding of the broader social contexts, the capacity to examine the processes of influence and change, and the wide array of variables that influence those processes. As such, grounded theory is gaining support as an effective methodology for leadership research (Parry, 1998).

### **Grounded Theory Methodology**

Grounded theory methodology of research and theory development has undergone an evolution that has followed different paths since its creators, Glaser and Strauss, wrote *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967. In developing this methodology, the researchers endeavored to combine elements of qualitative and quantitative research to effectively advance theoretical and practical knowledge in the social sciences. The key

characteristics of grounded theory are as follows: theory is generated by inductive logic through immersion in the data; theory is based on symbolic interaction concepts (processes and dynamic relationships between people and their environment); data gathering and analysis is cyclic, using constant comparison and abductive logic; and theoretical sensitivity of the researcher is acknowledged and necessary (Dey, 1999; Oktay, 2012). It is important to note, however, that grounded theory remains an unrefined and ambiguous methodology nearly 50 years after its introduction, leaving room for variation in interpretation and execution (Dey, 1999). Strauss and a former graduate student, Corbin, published a basic introduction to grounded theory in 1990 that was criticized by Glaser for significant deviations from the original methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Their approach was noted by Glaser and other critics to emphasize positivist methodology, which undermines the fundamental principles of theory emergent from grounded data. They suggested a coding paradigm, a conceptual framework involving conditions, context, strategies, and consequences. This paradigm contrasts with the inductive emphasis, forcing researcher interpretation of data rather than allowing for theory to emerge from the data (Dey, 1999). Obviously, it is difficult to place grounded theory into a specific paradigm as intended by its creators, as they also offered contrasting ontological and epistemological perspectives. As such, it is important to describe the theoretical assumptions underlying the methodology of this study as determined by the researcher as appropriate for realizing the purpose of the study: to gain an understanding of a potentially new and unique form of leadership that can lend to the construction of a new theory. Throughout this study, I endeavored to remain true to the foundational elements of grounded theory as described in methodological approaches and

assumptions as I believe the classic paradigm offers the most appropriate approach for the stated purpose of the research concerned with substantive context and social process as related to disruptive leadership. Thus, grounded theory approach allows room for flexibility not found in traditional research. Patton (2002) described grounded theory as “best understood as fundamentally realist and objectivist in orientation, emphasizing disciplined and procedural ways of getting the researcher’s biases out of the way but adding healthy doses of creativity to the analytical process” (p. 129). Such creativity can be orientational in nature, drawing from an explicit ideological perspective that guides focus, approach, and interpretation of data. A critical realism perspective guided and strengthened the approach utilized in this study.

### **Critical Realism Perspective**

Kempster and Parry (2011) described a growing call for “grounded, qualitative approach into the relational, and processual issues of leadership within discrete contexts” (p. 108). However, the authors noted a lingering dissonance between grounded theory and traditional positivist scientific approach, upon which the tests of validity, reliability, and generalizability must be satisfied with objective measurement and methodology. Kempster and Parry reasoned that such criterion are invalid tests for leadership research: “If indeed leadership is a contextually based process of social influence, then arguably the only ‘truth’ that is universal is that all such universal leadership theories are fallible and could not be disproved in the sense that all contexts are in some way unique” (p. 109). In order to address this conflict, they suggested that grounded theory study can be strengthened through the application of critical realism, a scientific philosophy based upon the foundation that “phenomena exist at the level of events and experiences but also

at a deeper level that might not be observable” (p. 107). They argued that approaching this theory with a critical realism lens allows researchers to acknowledge not just observable empirical realities and events that occur in time and space, but also a deeper reality: “powers that are often unobserved yet causally efficacious” (p. 109). The critical realism perspective suggests an ontological alternative to the epistemological criteria of validity and generalizability: pragmatism, practical adequacy, and plausibility. Such criteria encourage and allow the generation of a theory that is compatible with the context and individuals of focus. Kempster and Parry (2011) described the following characteristics of grounded theory research guided by a critical realism perspective:

1. Emphasis is placed on context-rich qualitative data collection.
2. The researcher is aware of a stratified reality in which data are influenced by underlying mechanisms.
3. The researcher draws on the ideas of extant knowledge in data analyzation.
4. Generation of explanations are drawn explicitly from empirical data or postulated to be occurring (potentially through the use of metaphor as explanation).
5. The development of a grounded theory that seeks to understand and explain the social processes of leadership within context (which includes a test for practical adequacy from the perspective of the study participants).
6. Research and theory are available for critique regarding usefulness in other contexts by researchers for potential convergence.

This study focused on the context, or situational circumstances, in which three women have developed as citizen leaders, and the processes by which they identified and

approached wicked problems and offered solutions that disrupt dysfunctional status quo within various local social structures in south central Kentucky. This grounded theory study was approached with a critical realism perspective in anticipation (and hope) of discovering the obscured and complex realities to better understand the unique leadership phenomena observed in the participants. This approach strengthened both the methodology and outcomes of the research, and allowed me the confidence and creativity to do the work well, and to show respect to the eager and willing participants.

### **Data Sources**

This theory was informed by narrative data collected from the participants that were believed to illustrate a unique leadership phenomenon. The participants of the study included a mother/farmer working to build local food systems to improve access, availability, and affordability to healthy food, providing choices for consumers and opportunity for farmers; a Kentucky native and director of a non-profit organization who uses a holistic approach to break cycles of poverty and homelessness through empowerment and inclusion; and a birth doula working to ensure that mothers are informed about birth options, that they have real birth choices and control over their birth experiences, and that the experience is physically and emotionally positive and healthy for mother and baby. Data sources included field observations through attendance at relevant meetings and events in which the participants served in leadership roles; documents (blogs, articles, editorials, social media posts, and other written works of the participants); and semi-structured interviews. The interview questions can be found in the next section and in Appendix A.

## **Data Collection**

In grounded theory methodology, the data collection process is ongoing as the theory develops; analysis occurs at the beginning of data collection. Constant comparison of data allows for the generation of concepts, which then drive subsequent data collection. Data sources included open-ended interviews; documents obtained from the participants or from public sources such as websites and social media; and field notes taken during workshops, events, and meetings conducted by the participants. The birth doula hosts meetings for expectant mothers to discuss relevant topics and educational courses on birth topics she also appears on local news for interviews about her organization. The farmer often speaks at conferences about her experiences as a farmer and mother working to promote local healthy food. The director of the food pantry hosts public fundraisers at which she describes the successes and challenges of her organization. These events provided opportunities to observe the women within their particular leadership contexts interacting with and communicating their visions to others. Each writes blogs and writes for other local publications as a way of sharing their visions and garnering support; the documents are rich sources of data. Finally, each participant was interviewed with open-ended questions intended to provoke thoughtful discussion about their motivations, challenges and, perhaps most important, the strategies they employ to approach wicked problems and to realize successful outcomes in their efforts to disrupt and to replace the status quo that they consider to be dysfunctional and failing to serve their communities. Interviewing is described as a mode of inquiry into individuals' experiences and their meanings, which inform theory. In essence, stories are ways of understanding meaning within context, and ultimately ways of knowing

(Seidman, 2013). As the process of data collection and analysis progressed, emerging categories informed the need for subsequent data that were obtained by follow-up questions with participants by email communication, phone, or in person. Additionally, as the study progressed, the participants began to communicate additional narrative relevant to the research. As participants reflected on the interview questions, they sent follow-up comments by email, or shared information through social media. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Describe the work you are doing to affect change in your community.
2. Why is this work important?
3. Who most understands the impact of your work?
4. What are your biggest obstacles/challenges?
5. What are your strategies for overcoming these challenges?
6. What encourages/motivates you to continue?
7. How are your efforts sustained or supported?
8. How have leadership examples or actions by other leaders influenced the way that you approach your work in affecting change?
9. Describe a moment or experience when you realized your capacity to lead or empower others in sharing your vision of change.
10. What is your long-term goal or vision, and what will you do when you have achieved it?

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying and describing patterns or themes. Opposing opinions exist regarding whether thematic



analysis in its own right is a specific method for qualitative analysis or whether it should be regarded as a tool to be used within other analytic traditions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used in this study as a tool for identifying themes upon which to build a foundation for theory. In grounded theory methodology, analysis of data is ongoing and continual. During the collection of narrative information in the form of field notes, documents, and interview transcripts, the data were analyzed and coded for emergent themes, according to grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) (with arguable deviation, described in more detail as follows). Categories were modified in light of new data and evidence as appropriate. Analysis began with line-by-line open coding to identify substantive codes (words or ideas of the respondents). During this analysis, the guidelines were followed as provided by Oktay (2012) to identify codes for further investigation: emotional words and phrases, action words, material that reflects symbolic interaction, and other significant words or phrases as determined. The coding process essentially involved recognizing each “important moment” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). Coding methodology is one divergence between Strauss and Glaser in grounded theory methodology (Dey, 1999). As was stated earlier, Strauss and Corbin’s 1990 guide to grounded theory methodology suggested a coding paradigm, a conceptual framework involving conditions, context, strategies, and consequences. While a formal coding paradigm was not used, the research questions guided the coding process, and moments that provided particular illumination were highlighted. While this appears to fall within the parameters of inductive methodology and, therefore, remains true to grounded theory approach, details are included here in the interest of transparency. As analysis continued, codes were ultimately organized into categories and then themes.

Vaismoradi (2013) described thematic analysis as “the search for and identification of common threads that exist across an entire interview set of interviews” (p. 400).

Throughout the process theoretical memos (informed analytic notes) were written to document (and later sort) thoughts and ideas. Memo writing is described as the “pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72) capturing comparisons and connections and guiding questions and further direction. “The prime *rule* is to *stop and memo* -- no matter what he interrupts”; the “memo fund” (Glaser, 1978, p. 83) allows the researcher to deposit ideas that can be revisited later. When I determined that theoretical saturation had been reached (the data failed to provide additional codes and categories) relevant literature was reviewed to compare and to contrast emergent themes with existing leadership theories, as described in Chapter II.

The data analysis is described in Chapter IV. For each theme that emerged, excerpts from the raw data were included to support that theme. My goal was to preserve the participant’s point of view and to provide context by linking my interpretation of the data directly to words of the participants (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Additionally, participants were provided with the opportunity to review the analysis following Kempster and Parry’s (2011) characteristics of grounded theory research guided critical realism perspective, which is the development of a grounded theory that seeks to understand and to explain the social processes of leadership within context that includes a test for practical adequacy from the perspective of the study interviewees.

Their inclusion in the process of data analysis (member checking) validates participants’

responses and my interpretations, while lending to the credibility of the research and supporting the criterion of practical adequacy.

### **The Researcher's Role**

Grounded theory research eschews pretense of researcher objectivity and acknowledges the researcher's theoretical sensitivity as a necessary element to the theory development process. Theorizing is impossible without prior experience in, and understanding and knowledge of the broader topic, in this case leadership. "When you theorize, you reach down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probe into the experience" (Charmez, 2006, p. 135). Patton (2002) stated, "the perspective that the researcher brings to a qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings" (p. 64). I have been a focused student of leadership, an informal observer of leadership, and have served in a non-authoritative professional position of leadership for eight years. My observations of the leadership demonstrated by these women as a unique phenomenon compelled me to pursue this topic. Additionally, as a personal and professional agent of change I am keenly interested in the concept of change through disruption of the dysfunctional status quo. Personal perspective and experience helped me to better understand and to communicate with the participants, effectively analyze and meaningfully interpret the data, develop categories from which theory could emerge, and share the results in a way that is authentic and credible. Reflexivity is researcher reflection on the impact of personal experiences, assumptions, and opinions on research findings (Oktay, 2012). In grounded theory study, reflexivity can enhance internal and external validity and overall strength of the research. Patton suggested that "reflexivity has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-

awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective" (p. 64). Internal and external validity and other criteria regarding the strength of the research are further discussed in the following sections.

### **Trustworthiness**

While the concept of reflexivity may seem counterintuitive to the conventional methods of inquiry, it encourages the researcher to be mindful of others' (both participants and readers) perspectives and ideologies, leading to reflexive triangulation and ultimately trustworthiness and credibility. Thoughtful acknowledgment of biases and limitations, and care in communicating authentically, are best conveyed through first person voice. As Patton (2002) explained, "voice is more than grammar . . . a credible, authoritative, authentic, and trustworthy voice engages the reader through rich description, thoughtful sequencing, appropriate use of quotes, and contextual clarity so that the reader joins the inquirer in the search for meaning" (p. 64). My intent is to honor the participants in this study, and the overall endeavor is to understand a new and brave type of leadership with personal voice that I believe will best convey the importance I place on this subject. Declaring truth leads to trustworthiness.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study followed the qualitative ethical considerations as follows:

- the principle of ethical consent; participants were free from emotional distress;
- the study does not include any damaging information;
- privacy and confidentiality have been observed as requested by the participants (names and personal information are included with participant review and consent);

- no potential existed for coercion; and it does not involve vulnerable populations.

The study was reviewed and approved by the Western Kentucky University (WKU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The primary limitation of this (and any grounded theory study) was that the researcher acted as a subjective filter through which data were collected and interpreted. While this is a fundamental element of grounded theory research, it challenges traditional criteria of validity and generalizability. As an alternative, Kempster and Parry (2011) suggested the criterion of pragmatism, practical adequacy, and plausibility (noted in the critical realism section). Acknowledging the possibility that no new theory would emerge from the data that were collected and analyzed, or that the categories would fit within an existing theory of leadership, I believed that the methodology and intent would allow for the emergence of themes from which to build theory that is pragmatic, practical, and plausible to the context and individuals from which it is constructed. If the emergent theory can be used to guide practice or continued research by other students of leadership, this study will be considered a success.

This research was delimited to a sample of three women in south central Kentucky. The nature of the grassroots, community-based approach taken by these leaders suggests that a local level examination may provide details that would not have been revealed. While examples of disruptive leadership, though not explicitly identified as such, can be found in literature, history, mainstream media, and even folklore and fairy tales from local to global levels, such leadership often appears to result from efforts at a community-based level. As such, it was logical to maintain a focus on community-based

disruptive leaders. As previously stated, place matters. The place-based approach to disruptive leadership is an important factor, as is illustrated in later discussion. Kentucky offers some special limitations and challenges, as well as opportunities, for leaders. The individuals in this study sought to affect change in local communities that potentially can serve as models for leadership approaches to change in others facing similar issues. Additionally, existing relationships between researcher and participants offered a level of comfort and trust that encouraged deeper and more detailed interview responses and allowed for a richer observation of the phenomenon. All of the characteristics of details of place, community, culture, personal stories that drive motivation, interpersonal relationships that allow for collaboration, and other situational elements examined in this case study helped to describe and to explain and gain understanding of the phenomenon of interest, disruptive leadership.

## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS

*Every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness.*

-Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A guide for researchers in education*, 2013, p. 7 – attributed to L.S. Vygotsky, qtd. Seidman

This study explored the process of leadership demonstrated by three women in south central Kentucky as a unique model of leadership: disruptive leadership. These citizen leaders sought to solve wicked problems, disrupting the unacceptable status quo by offering better alternatives. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What does it mean to be a disruptive leader?; (2) What are the central concerns of leaders facing wicked problems?; (3) What motivates leaders to solve such problems?; (4) What strategies are employed to address such problems?; and (5) How can disruptive leadership be distinguished from other leadership styles that share similar traits? Using a grounded theory approach, interview and written narrative and field observations were analyzed for emergent themes to answer the research questions and to understand the leadership demonstrated by each woman. The themes revealed details about their capacities, motivations, and strategies and offered a more profound observation: these leaders practice disruptive wonder, challenging hegemony and existing power structures to build inclusive emergent social systems equipped to solve wicked problems.

This chapter introduces the participants in contextual detail, anchoring their current work in leading change and solving wicked problems in real-life experiences that may illuminate their motives and determination, as well as explain the capabilities and strategies that help them succeed. The themes that emerged from analysis of the data are then described and explored. These themes are compelling, as they include the details that fill a descriptive gap for this type of leadership. Furthermore, they provide the

constructs that make this theory of leadership unique and distinctive. They also provide a foundation for a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which citizen leaders approach and solve wicked problems through disruption of the status quo.

### **Introductions to the Participants**

Prior to beginning these introductions, please note that participants have given permission to use their real names. All three women reviewed early drafts of the narrative analysis for accuracy in representation of their words and expressions. However, they did not review the final analysis before submission to the doctoral faculty.

#### **Mary Duke**

Mary Duke is the proprietor of My Sunshine Birth Services, a network of birth and postpartum professionals with a stated mission to “remove fear through understanding, provide outstanding support for families, and nurture a feeling of community” ([mysunshinebirth.com](http://mysunshinebirth.com), 2015). While Mary is the creator of My Sunshine Birth Services, the organization is a network of six trained doulas who offer a variety of diverse birth services. Mary is a Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator (LCCE) and Doula of North America (DONA) trained birth doula. She offers childbirth education services such as Lamaze, nutrition, and breastfeeding classes as well as one-to-one childbirth education, placenta encapsulation, and workshops on other birth topics. Additionally, as stated on her webpage, Mary offers “Advocacy and Education Programs for Rural Communities and America’s Farm Families” ([mysunshinebirth.com/meet-mary](http://mysunshinebirth.com/meet-mary), 2015). She is an administer of BabyNet KY and serves as a steering committee member and community liaison for the Kentucky Home Birth Coalition.

The term “doula” is thought to have originated from the Greek word “doulē,” meaning “female slave,” and is used in the contemporary sense to refer to a woman who



provides labor support. DONA states that the word “doula” is derived from the ancient Greek meaning “a woman who serves” ([www.dona.org/mothers/](http://www.dona.org/mothers/), 2005). My first introduction to Mary was at a business start-up fundraising event, at which local entrepreneurs make their case for funding support to realize their visions. Mary explained the need for My Sunshine Birth Services in south central Kentucky, where access to holistic and balanced birth education is limited. The contributors granted the funding in near unanimous consensus.

Limited access to birth education in rural Kentucky is an element of a far more complex and systemic problem related to birth and family planning. Mary Duke formed My Sunshine Birth Services as a strategy for addressing a wicked problem. I began to understand the depth and breadth of the problem on a cold February evening at a local coffee shop. Mary had invited me to join “Meet the Doulas,” a monthly event sponsored by My Sunshine Birth Services. On this occasion three south central Kentucky doulas attended. Before others arrived, the doulas discussed Senate Bill 85, which was submitted by the Kentucky Home Birth Coalition for the 2016 Legislative Session. The bill was to permit midwifery to be practiced legally in Kentucky. It has been illegal since 1975, when midwifery practice applications ceased to be accepted by the state. In the 40 years since, midwifery has been an underground practice in Kentucky; SB 85 sought to change that. Mary and the doulas were nervous and excited, as Mary was headed to the Kentucky capital of Frankfort the following day to fight for the bill to be heard in the Senate Health and Welfare Committee meeting the following week. Discussion of progress on SB 85 took the back burner when two young women arrived, both expecting. They asked questions about Lamaze classes, nutrition, postpartum depression, and baby positioning.

The doulas had answers, reassuring them and providing resources. The discussion was filled with references to birth stories of mothers they knew, both positive and negative, although predominantly negative. They spoke about the fears these stories instilled in them, using phrases such as: “could feel nothing,” “loss of control,” “manipulation by doctors and nurses,” and “no information.” One of the women expressed her relief to have found Mary and the doulas, explaining that she had just learned about them from her sister; she resided in a rural community in which no local prenatal care is available.

After the event, Mary explained to me that it is common, particularly in rural Kentucky, for expectant mothers to have no access to birth education other than that which they may find on the Internet or in books. Much of the information is related to hospital births, advising expectant mothers to discuss questions and options with their doctors. I was not sure why this is a problem, and Mary provided a homework assignment: watch “The Business of Being Born,” a 2008 documentary found on Netflix which explains that (in the U.S. particularly) birth has become a business, a market hegemony that has stripped mothers of informed choice and power. Mothers in the United States are largely unaware that birth options exist and unquestioningly accept as status quo hospital births, planned Caesarean sections, epidurals, and emphasis on medicine in the birthing process. In fact, this approach to birth is that of the medical system, and options for other birth experiences exist that may more appropriately serve many women and their families. Mary described the work of she and others in the birth community as a “kick back against the establishment” and “the next frontier in the women’s movement.” They seek to solve a wicked problem by disrupting a status quo they consider to be unacceptable and reallocating power to the appropriate stakeholders.

## **Rhondell Miller**

Rhondell Miller is the Executive Director of Helping Others Through Extending Love in the Name of Christ (HOTEL) INC, a faith-based non-profit that attempts to “break the cycle of poverty and homelessness to build self-sufficient households” ([hotelincbg.com/about/](http://hotelincbg.com/about/), 2016). With a staff of six and many volunteers, HOTEL INC offers several programs, including financial assistance; a drop-in center that offers laundry, shower, and computer services; a community garden; homeless outreach and street medicine (a program in which teams of volunteers visit homeless encampments to provide basic medical support and to assist with registration for Medicaid health insurance); life classes; devotion and chaplain services; transitional housing; veterans’ services; and a food pantry that offers fresh local vegetables, dairy, and meat products. To sustain these services, HOTEL INC conducts extensive fundraising through a variety of programs that encourage community support. The morning of our interview at a local coffee shop, Rhondell wore a beaming smile. The previous night, HOTEL INC hosted its annual fundraiser, Empty Bowls. The event features pottery bowls crafted by local artisans that guests can purchase and fill with prepared homemade soup for a sit-down dinner. Proceeds from ticket and bowl sales support HOTEL INC service programs. When I asked her about the event, she reported that it was highly attended to the extent that they stopped the serving line twice to get more soup and bowls.

Of 30 candidates, Rhondell Miller was selected for the director position in March 2012. She was familiar with HOTEL INC. Rhondell had distance-volunteered from her home in West Virginia where she served as Outreach Director for the largest soup kitchen in the state. Her long distance engagement was in preparation for a move to Bowling

Green in support of her husband's career. When she arrived in Kentucky, she worked for a short time for the non-profit organization Habitat for Humanity before the HOTEL INC director position opened and she was urged by the former director to apply. Declaring it a "No Spam Zone," Rhondell is determined to offer fresh, healthy, local food in the HOTEL INC food pantry, a departure from the usual non-perishables reserved for donation to food assistance programs. She has built relationships within the local food community in that endeavor, which is how our paths crossed. In the greater community, she is a highly regarded "do-er," bringing a vision to HOTEL INC that is much larger than the mission statement describes, which in itself is adequately lofty: "As a faith-based non-profit, HOTEL INC breaks the cycle of poverty and homelessness to build self-sufficient households. Staff and volunteers develop innovative programs to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of clients, so they might break free from cycles of poverty and homelessness." (HOTEL INC, 2016). Rhondell attended college but did not earn a degree, indicating that she "hated it" (college). She is a former dance instructor, a self-described entrepreneur for 25 years, and an artist.

Rhondell is not satisfied with simply feeding people in need of food assistance; she desires to break the cycle of poverty. Rather than putting a band-aid on the problem that has proved thus far impossible to solve, Rhondell seeks to empower and to enable impoverished and marginalized individuals (and families) to bring them back into the community as self-reliant and engaged citizens. She finds the status quo unacceptable of providing services that keep people alive but do not actually help them to live full lives. Such practices perpetuate the allowance of an entire population to become and to remain invisible, forgotten in the corners, under the bridges, and in the woods while the rest of

society goes about their lives, blissfully ignorant in their good fortune and enjoying the luxury of civic engagement when they choose. Rhondell is working to solve a wicked problem through the administration of HOTEL INC as an organization beyond a homeless shelter and food pantry. Her vision is much broader than the provision of temporary relief for those experiencing food insecurity and homelessness; her goal is to break the cycle of poverty and to expand the current notions of community.

### **Michelle Howell**

Michelle Howell wears many hats, but she self-identifies as a mother, a farmer, and a farm wife. She and her husband Nathan studied agriculture in college, where they met, and worked in agriculture professions until four years ago when they decided to farm full time. Michelle described this as a life-changing decision, one that she and Nathan contemplated and for which they prepared for a long time. This decision came with another commitment: to nurture other farmers to do the same. Michelle thought this would be a relatively straightforward endeavor, to teach other farmers to farm. Since then she has been working to remove barriers to full-time farming that she did not anticipate - educating consumers on the value of healthy, local food; working to remove policy barriers that challenge the production and distribution of local food; and building a community that supports farmers and local food. Today their farm, Need More Acres, is comprised of field crops and high tunnel crops, yielding fresh produce year round. Need More Acres (NMA) supports a 22-member Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, provides local fruits and vegetables for local schools and restaurants, aggregates products from local producers to offer a farm store, offers a certified kitchen for use by others to create value-add products, and serves as an incubator for new farmers and other

entrepreneurs. The day of her interview Michelle remarked that there was “a lot happening” on the farm. This was obvious. Zach, a new farmer who works at NMA two days per week to supplement his knowledge and income, fed the pigs; Jackson, a new farmer who farms both at NMA and at his own farm partnering on projects and gaining practical knowledge, prepared to pick up seedlings and other supplies; Mary, with her baby on her back, prepared 800 samples of broccoli in the certified kitchen to be delivered along with educational material to school children the next day; and the children busily moved through a variety of helpful activities, from watching over the smaller ones to preparing broccoli samples. In all of this, Michelle managed to carve out a quiet space and time for the interview, giving me the same gift she somehow consistently gives to others, focused attentiveness amidst the chaos of farm life.

My first meeting with Michelle was five years ago. She was wearing a baby on her back, Adeline, her fourth child (and third girl). The purpose of our meeting was to discuss her vision for a bus that would deliver fresh, local food in the community food deserts. Research conducted by a Western Kentucky University graduate student had identified several marginalized (low income and/or minority) populations in need of improved access and affordability to healthy, fresh food in the Bowling Green community. Michelle’s agricultural education and experience had made her aware of market and resultant economic challenges experienced by local farmers for whom full-time farming was a seemingly impossible goal. The bus that Michelle envisioned now sits at the Community Farmers Market when not carrying vegetables to consumers who otherwise would not have access. Both the bus and the market manifest shared visions that have disrupted the status quo and that begin to address a multitude of complex and

connected economic and health problems in the regional area. Michelle has worked with an array of stakeholders to create opportunities for existing and new farmers, to improve the eating habits of school children and adults, and to build the local economy on a foundation of local food access and affordability.

### **The Narrative Themes**

This section shares themes that emerged from the narrative analysis of the data described in the methodology. For each theme, excerpts from each of the participants help to explain or to support those themes. These excerpts were taken directly from interview transcripts and narrative written by the participants and are identified by source. Additionally, where appropriate, observations recorded in field notes during the data collection process are included. Four themes emerged in these stories of leadership, which distinguish them from the traits, characteristics, styles, and skills described in traditional and current leadership theories. In the simplest of terms, these themes are:

1. Each leader possesses the capacity for disruptive wonder.
2. Each leader is engaged in the disruption of existing power structure and distribution.
3. In the process of disruptive wonder each leader is challenging hegemony.
4. Each leader is using innovative and effective strategies to solve a wicked problem.

Although these themes are listed as if each is discrete, arranging them in such a manner is unsatisfactory and misleading, as they are not distinct and cannot be listed as such. Additionally, no order is suggested, as each loops back into another in various directions of cause and effect. They connect and overlap in many ways, but they are

subtly threaded together through the disruption of power. As a strategy to solve wicked problems, the leaders in this study engaged in the reallocation, dispersion, and elimination of existing power dynamics and structures that are failing individuals and communities. These structures may be obvious, such as the hierarchical organizational structure that resists inclusivity; or they may be invisible, such as the cultural hegemonies that have led to the acceptance of status quo without question. Anderson (2011) stated: “The world is full of order that doesn’t deserve our respect. Sometimes there is meaning, justice, and logic present in the way things are — but sometimes there just isn’t. . . . The moment that we realize this is the moment we become creative people. Because it prompts us to mess things up and do something better with the basic pieces of experience” (video file). Disruptive wonder allows these leaders to see and to solve wicked problems in ways that others cannot, deconstructing the problem and reconstructing a solution from the various pieces. From non-authoritative positions, they seek to disperse power, rather than attain it, and to redistribute it, and give it back to those who have lost it due to marginalization or to those who never possessed it.

This thematic conclusion is not tidy, and in fact resembles the messy spider’s web of emergent operating systems. While this analysis may feel a bit like the impossible and confusing multi-plane art of M.C. Escher, each of the four themes can be supported and demonstrated through the words and narratives of the participants. I will do my best to make sense of it and to express it in a manner that aptly describes a distinct construct upon which a grounded theory of disruptive leadership may be built.



## **Disruptive Wondering**

Duncombe (2010) stated that the power of cultural hegemony lies in its invisibility, residing within individuals and the stories they tell and words and images used, feeling sufficiently comfortable that they do not notice, much less feel inclined to resist. Each woman's story begins with a significant life event that exposed a wicked problem and caused them to question and reassess the social constructs that lay beneath the problems as roots and at the same time burying them. They became engaged in disruptive wonder, considering how the status quo came to be, and rejecting the notion that it must be accepted as such. Rittel and Webber (1973) reported that wicked problems lack clarifying traits. Perhaps the fundamental ability to see the problem and its clarifying traits through the thick layers of hegemony is a distinctive ability of the disruptive leader. Once one has identified such a problem, there appears to be no going back. The women became empowered, by no other authority bestowed upon them than the authority of those who can see things when others cannot. In this case, the only course of action appears to be to step up with the resolution and conviction that, for reasons not completely understood, the ability to see comes with a responsibility to lead change.

Mary described a journey that began as a new wife, contemplating motherhood and feeling overwhelming fear regarding birth. Her fear led her to begin conducting research, although the resources and information she found offered little comfort. She declared that she was considered an "oddity" as a woman not trying to conceive but attending Baby Net community meetings and Improving Birth rallies. However, Mary's experiences and narrative described an entire population of uneasy and afraid mothers seeking information beyond that which is provided in typical prenatal care in the United

States. Mary's personal experience and her observations of others opened her eyes to a problem she could not ignore and would adopt as her life's work:

I realized, here I am in this unique situation where I realize these things need to happen and I also have the time to do them because I myself am not a mother. I started to take on more and more roles in the birth community, and a midwife pulled me aside at a Baby Net community meeting and said, "I want you to come to births with me." And I had no idea why. It was an amazing thing just for her to even offer that to me, but I wasn't sure why. I went home and I thought about it and then I called her back and I said: I would love to... I would be crazy to say no. But I just don't understand why, because I don't have any intentions of ever becoming a midwife and there are lots of people who want to be midwives who would love to have that spot. I didn't want to take it from someone who wanted to make a career out of it. And she said, "I just see a lot in you and know you're going to do a lot for this community and the step that you're missing is you need to actually be connected to birth." And so I started going to births with her and that changed my life.

I really still struggle with the, Why me? Like, why am I the one doing this, why am I the one, like, why me? And I guess it just came down to... I did.

Rhondell Miller also described a life experience that led to her work to challenge and to disrupt a status quo. However, her experience of seeing the invisible is perhaps more literal, as is her work in helping others to see the invisible. During our interview, I remarked that her passion appeared to be helping people and I asked her if this was always the case. Her answer was surprising:

When I was a child my parents instilled in me and my brother to always help people. I grew up in a Christian household, a traditional household of faith, and we always had what I considered ‘extras’ in our home. Sometimes they were family members who needed a place to live; sometimes they were strangers to us, young people in the community whose parents couldn’t take care of them and our parents would take them in with us. But I resented it. It took from my brother and I to give so much energy to these other people, so I really became very cold hearted towards people, and probably what you would consider a bigot to people who were poor or homeless.

Rhondell continued with a story of her 19-year-old self, leaving her dance studio to find a homeless and drunk man asking for help. She pushed him to the ground and spat on him, telling him he had everything he deserved, which was nothing. Rhondell described feeling justified in that behavior, even as a person of faith. She interjected at that point a statement about raising her son to be compassionate and described him as one of the most compassionate individuals she knows. Later in her life when her husband posed the question inspired by a book he was reading: “Rhondell, do you love your neighbor as much as you love yourself?”, she had an epiphany:

In that moment I just came to terms with, No. I don’t love my neighbor because I don’t love myself in any way, shape, or form. . . . and it just began a really personal journey for me on a lot of healing that needed to take place in my life of things I had gone through as a child or young adult, and to really lean in on what that meant in my faith. I kind of describe it as allowing God to remove a ton of

layers of myself to reflect Himself. So, far from perfect but He gave me a heart for people and then called me to do this work.

While her early experiences did not directly lead to her position as a disruptive leader, they nonetheless exposed a problem and served as events that she now recalls as significant in her life story. Only after her own complicity in an unacceptable and previously unquestioned social reality was revealed did she feel ready to take action. Her faith served as a catalyst to heal and to empower her. Rhondell, perhaps more than the others, seeks to make visible a wicked problem in society. When asked about her work, she described herself as a “plower,” plowing up the underground of the community in order that no one is hidden beneath the cover of beauty and privilege that blankets the town. Her vision is one of a truly whole community in which no person is invisible and every person is given a second chance, or as many as they need. Rhondell is working to deconstruct that which appears on the surface to be a complete community, and to reconstruct it in a way in which every individual is visible and matters.

Similar to Rhondell and Mary, Michelle Howell described a life story that led to her work to improve healthy, local food access to consumers and to support farmers. She and her mother were the invisibles Rhondell seeks to help; they experienced food insecurity and relied on government assistance and inexpensive, processed food for much of Michelle’s childhood. Though she was not raised on a consistent supply of fresh produce, Michelle ultimately pursued agricultural jobs and an agriculture degree. However, her focus was not on nutrition; rather, it was on the business of farming and helping farmers to make a living wage. It was not until she became a mother and realized she was not feeding her family the food farmers were growing, that Michelle was able to

see a bigger picture that revealed a wicked problem extending far beyond the business of farming to issues of food security, public health, environmental health, and economic stability:

I started to have “ah ha” moments and go, well if Nathan and I are involved in food work and farming, but we’re not eating this food at home, then there’s a problem. So what is keeping us from doing that? So my first “ah ha” moment was when Elizabeth, she refused formula, so the nurses were like, “you’re gonna have to breastfeed her.” So I kinda got forced into breastfeeding her. But it ended up being a really great experience. She ended up being healthier than my first child was, it was easier, cheaper and the more I read into it, it’s healthier for her. It was what she was intended to eat and it made me think, okay, now she’s getting breast milk what is she going to eat next?

Michelle described reinforcing experiences, such as the food sensitivities of her third daughter diagnosed with autism and treated successfully with food, and the early passing of Nathan’s mother as a result of liver disease. Michelle began to ask, “Why we are doing this to ourselves?” and to question the hegemonic forces that brought society to a place in which food is harmful rather than nourishing. She was compelled to work for change:

So we made, I made, changes in my own home, for me first. I started eating better myself and then for my family and then I decided that I wanted to help create better food access for other people. Because when I realized the barriers that I had, and realized the barriers that my friends had, or people that I knew... And so I started on that side of it, which I think is unique compared to most people involved in local food system development I guess.

Similar to Mary Duke, Michelle was unable to explain why she is the one to do this work, other than because she is both able and willing. As with Rhondell and Mary, she feels a responsibility to resolve a problem she has identified and cannot ignore:

I feel like sort of like mine and Nathan's role in the community has been to figure out what the next barrier is, and figure out a way to break through it and I can't really explain why Nathan and I are the ones that do that outside of the fact that we're a unique team, that we're a husband and wife that both have the knowledge and education and know the right people and, I mean, our hearts are in the right place, we want to do the right thing and we're willing to work really hard.

While the disruptive leaders in this study may have questioned their positions of leadership in the work they do, I believe that it is because they each possess the capacity for disruptive wonder. This capacity distinguishes the complacent from the doers. Many may possess a general dissatisfaction with the status quo, but few feel efficacy in making change. This efficacy is borne from the ability to deconstruct the problem, to sort through the connections and the complex feedbacks of cause and effect, to identify the stakeholders, and to envision (and believe in) a reconstruction that better serves society. Perhaps seeing the invisible is not the point at which turning back is impossible; rather, it is ability to see the possible alternatives that keeps these leaders resolutely on course.

### **Power Disruptions**

Power is a recurring thread that runs through the various elements of disruptive leadership, as demonstrated by these women. They lead not as authority figures, but as citizens, women, mothers, daughters, wives, caregivers, and humans. When asked why they feel others listen to them, the question appeared to take them by surprise. Rhondell

explained that she has identified as a leader her entire life: “Never a follower, never a follower. I’ve always been a strong leader. ... I was raised to have strong value and strong character and that leadership wasn’t a bad thing.” However, when I asked her why she thinks people listen to her, she responded, “Do you think they do?” Interestingly, Mary Duke responded similarly when asked the same question: “I don’t know... Why do you think people listen to me? ... I don’t know.” However, she explained that she feels people follow her because she has good intentions. She regularly asks the doulas and others in her network whether they feel that is the case: “Do y’all still trust my intentions? And they are like, ‘Yeah’. And I’m like, well we’re on the right path.” Mary’s consultation with her network of doulas serves as an example of that which makes this leadership approach both distinctive and disruptive. Rather than seeking power, these leaders are reallocating and dispersing it.

At their core, the wicked problems these women work to solve are social injustices that the un-empowered are challenged to fight on their own behalf. Mary works to empower expectant parents by expanding their birth choices beyond doctor-assisted hospital births, which are thought by many to be the only option, a belief perpetuated by a healthcare system that prioritizes profit. Rhondell works to empower a population that is largely invisible, because acknowledging them is to acknowledge the uncomfortable fact that, while most individuals are calorie rich and sleep under sound roofs, their fellow human beings suffer from hunger and sleep under nearby overpasses. Michelle works to empower consumers and producers of food by improving access to whole, fresh, nutritious foods to those who otherwise would be limited to processed, high calorie but low nutrient food that leads to the health problems ubiquitous in present society. These

problems are systemic and their origins can be traced back through decades of cultural hegemony driven by powers with interests of profits, rather than people.

Rittel and Webber (1973) surmised that wicked problems are in part due to the fact that a “plurality of objectives held by pluralities of politics makes it impossible to pursue unitary aims; and so on” (p.160). The leaders in this study have deconstructed this notion and reconstructed it in a way that rejects the idea that a unitary aim can be determined by a plurality of politics with a plurality of objectives. Rather, these leaders proposed that the unitary aim be determined by a plurality of stakeholders not necessarily included in Rittel and Webber’s equation, and rarely included in the influences that resulted the wicked problem in the first place, but most impacted by it. Contrary to the assumptions of those perplexed by wicked problems, the unitary aims identified by these women and the stakeholders they represent and engage are quite simple. Michelle Howell expounded on her process of working through problems (an eloquent example of disruptive wonder) in her December 2, 2015, blog post entitled “Advent Week One (Hope for Motherhood)”:

As soon as another difficult thing hits the news feed my mind immediately goes to fixing the current problem. I begin to ask myself, “How can we take control of this hard thing or use our power and influence to stop that terrifying thing?” Then, when those feelings and emotions begin to subside, I begin to ask myself questions that take me all the way back to root causes that may have lead to the hurt of the individual at first and then the community.



This process brings me back to the most basic needs all humans share in common at birth. To be born, fed, and nurtured in the ways our creator intended must matter in some significant way.

How can we reimagine our most basic needs in such a way that puts dignity back into the hands of the individual? I'm certain that it is worth -at the very least- more of my time and attention.

As Michelle, Mary, and Rhondell engage all relevant stakeholders in the achievement of unitary goals (breaking the cycle of poverty, providing birth options, improving food access), they challenge the idea that plurality of politics is a legitimate obstruction. Rhondell views politics as a necessary and even enjoyable element of her work. However, she quickly demonstrated her understanding of where the power lies (with the business controlled lobbyists) and where her opportunities for disrupting these power structures lie (in allied collaboration and education):

I love politics, I look at what happens in all levels of the political structure, and then I look at us as American citizens and I think: we just step back, and we just allow this handful, truly a handful, of business owners in our country to decide everything for us. It's not our legislator. It's not our congress. It's not our governor or our president who make these [decisions]. It's our lobbyists who control. And advocates like a nonprofit, we can't lobby. So advocates like myself ... I mean you beat your head against the wall all the time. But you try to find those other advocates that are just as empowered as you are. And then you look at the education opportunities that you can take. I never meet with someone in

politics and think that I'm going to change their mind, but I'm gonna listen to them and I want equal time that they are listening to me.

Mary Duke described the reclamation of power that is the foundation of her work:

Why it [her work] matters is because it is the next step in women's rights.

Because we have had the -- and I can get really emotional talking about this -- but we have had our power taken away from us and the greatest power that we have is the power to bring life into this world. We don't need the help of... generally speaking the majority of the time... we don't need help from men in white coats to get that done. You know we can do that, we have the power and we have to take that power back. We're thankful to have the hospital system when we deal with high risk moms, when we deal with an emergency situation, but most of the time birth is non-emergency. And we're perfectly capable of birthing our children.

The theme of power disruption goes beyond reclamation and reallocation. These leaders also disperse power, attempting to empower other potential disruptors. When asked who they believe most understands the impact of their work, Michelle and Mary provided answers that caused them to pause in reflection. Other citizen leaders and wicked problem solvers, they said, most appreciate the difficulty and importance of their work. Mary Duke described the women in and beyond her network fighting for birth options for mothers:

I have to say, and I wish the answer to that question was the moms themselves that we are helping. I wish that that was it, but I guess that the real answer is the birth professionals are really the ones that understand the impact of it.

Michelle Howell spoke of other agents of change:

I would say definitely the people that understand the impact of my work are those people who are trying to create any kind of change themselves. ... It's the people who are also out there trying to make change who are overcoming the obstacles who are willing to go and negotiate on something that most people would never take the effort to negotiate on, or are good listeners, or try to make real change, or are always looking at what's good for the whole. Those are the people that I think understand me.

These leaders are engaged in trans-local learning, described by Wheatley and Frieze (2011) as an idea carried from one community to another in which it is not necessarily replicated or scaled up, but adapted, evolved, and grown in a way that makes sense for that setting and existing conditions. While wicked problems may be contextual, strategies for solutions can and should be shared. In the case of these leaders, trans-local learning happens organically. The empowerment of other leaders is an unexpected but beneficial outcome of the emergent properties of disruptive leadership.

### **Challenging Hegemony**

The leaders in this study reject the status quo as acceptable. They question why and how the current situation came to be, deconstructing hegemonies and then reconstructing the elements to build a reality that better serves the current human condition. However, the declaration of their intent and capacity is a gross reduction and implies that the process is simple. In reality, it is exceedingly difficult to challenge cultural norms, even if they don't make sense or serve society well. These leaders likely would say that a failure to serve society is an understatement for the wicked problems

they face; these problems are costing lives. As Rhondell Miller stated, “I often say I don’t have time to beat around the bush. People’s lives hang in the balance so I don’t have time to talk about something for a year.”

Mary Duke expressed a similar degree of urgency:

When you really get down to what it’s truly about is that we have women and children who are losing their lives in our medical system because of our maternity care. We have a really high rate of deaths and we’re ranked 43 in the world when it comes to maternity care. Kentucky is the third worst state in the United States to give birth in.

Michelle Howell also described the seriousness of her problem in terms of the lives at stake:

We were in the hospital with [Nathan’s mother] and I was shocked to see how many people were in their 60s were dying, and how many were dying at a younger age and were suffering ...and our health is really suffering because of the food we eat. But nobody has really been paying attention to it to the point of making changes.

Complacent acceptance of cultural hegemonies that disregard the lives of marginalized and unempowered populations is not an option for these leaders. The challenge can be overwhelming, suggestive of the fabled hero stories in which the underdog prevails over the mighty evil. Mary Duke commented:

So I guess with changing a culture the biggest issue that I have is the fact that these are -- and I’m dealing with this right now so it’s all fresh on my mind -- large for profit agencies have this monopoly over birth in Kentucky, and that it’s

the culture that I'm trying to change. So it's trying to pull together this grassroots movement and then hoping that we have the power to change this huge monopoly.

When Michelle Howell began to ask questions regarding the reasons Nathan's mom and her generation were spending considerable time in rural Kentucky hospitals, she realized it was the result of the concerted effort of big business manipulating an entire generation of consumers:

They did eat that way [healthy whole foods] before; that's the food that they ate on the farm. So why did they quit? So I started asking questions and watching commercials from the 60s and 70s and 80s and it was very intentional and, as you know, the food system has changed as we were taking corn and soy and wheat and making most of our food out of those items. Making more processed food, the companies wanted to sell those to people so it was very intentional especially in rural communities and that's who has the poorest health rates right now. And it was very intentional. That's who those companies wanted to be buying their food. Nathan's mom went from eating chickens out of her back yard and milking her own cow, and brown eggs, and making bread everyday, from doing all that to being sold, they were basically given a TV by the grocery store. Grocery stores handed out TVs and the TV told her on a 20/20 documentary or one of those shows not to eat brown eggs because they were dangerous and they made you sick. And that's the very first change she made, she never ate brown eggs again.

Later in the interview Michelle spoke of the obstacles in changing the food system:

And then I think generally in the work that I'm trying to do one of the obstacles is there are reasons that we are not eating well and there are reasons why people are

not farming full time and there are people in positions of power that have worked very hard to hold people down over these past years, and that's in every single layer of the food system, and in ways that I never thought, you know. ... I always wanted to be surprised by people abusing power. I always wanted it to affect me. I never wanted to get to the point where it didn't affect me anymore. But at the same time I needed to learn to expect it because it's the reality, you know, and that's what it is. So that would be the biggest, that would be the obstacle that anybody that works in food system development that's trying to make change, is just the constant obstacles, the constant distractions. I feel like there's always something happening that's slowing down progress.

Rhondell, in describing her long-term vision when she will consider her work a success, essentially described changing the perspective of the whole of society to be inclusive and accepting of every person as a citizen:

So ... my big vision for our community is that we see the wholeness. Is that we don't talk about one side of the tracks as those people. Is that we don't turn our head when we encounter someone who looks different than us, smells different than us, speaks different than us. That HOTEL INC can continue to be at the forefront of education. Educating donors, volunteers, having influence in policy that is made not criminalizing homelessness. Giving opportunity, second chances to people, and learning that second chances can be given. And sometimes that's really a fifth chance but never really give up on somebody.

These leaders doggedly and determinedly work to disrupt, messing things up as necessary. Anderson (2011) described the way to "better" as through a "million teeny

tiny disruptions to whatever is sitting in front of you” (video file). Perhaps that is one of the secrets of these leaders’ success, seizing momentary opportunities to make even the smallest of disruptions and having faith that it will create a ripple effect. Taking advantage of opportunities to make tiny disruptions may be one strategy, but certainly there are others. Perhaps one of the most important abilities of disruptive leaders is the recognition that opportunities for disruption are always in front of you, and that every one of them is significant - none are truly tiny, and they may appear in vastly different and unexpected forms.

**Disrupting gender.** Caught in the Escher-esque thematic analysis of this narrative, the context in which to introduce gender presented a challenge. Doing gender “involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). The topic of gender is conspicuously present in all of these narratives as a thread that runs through each of the themes. These women are challenged by constructs of gender and negotiate social gender in every interaction and with every action they take. This simple fact leads me to the belief that the discussion is best placed under the theme of challenging hegemony. Illustrations included in this narrative analysis provide additional evidence of how gender plays a role in the capacity of these leaders for disruptive wonder, as well as in the roots of the wicked problems and the strategies they employ in the process of solving them. Interestingly, only one of the participants self-identifies as a feminist. Each woman falls in a different area on the gender theory spectrum (gender equality, gender resistance, and gender rebellion) and each does gender in a unique way.

When Rhondell was asked whether she considers herself a feminist, she replied simply that she does not consider herself a feminist; she considers herself a person who gets things done. This response suggests a degree of gender rebellion, as if Rhondell is resisting or shrugging off the label, redirecting me back to the fact that she is a *person* - who gets things done. She used words and phrases such as, “dynamic personality,” “domineering sometimes,” and “forthright in the purpose” in describing herself. When asked about leadership examples that have influenced her work, Rhondell described her former boss, whom she and others called “Mean Jean.” Rhondell indicated she was “mean when she needed to be” and “strong in her advocacy and saying all the time ‘it’s never enough.’” Describing her own work, she reinforced her self-description of one who gets things done:

And so I feel like I plow the dirt so people see all of those of our community, and I may not live to see the harvest but I’ll plow. And it’s not comfortable for people... I’ve had leaders in our community tell them that I challenge them, and I’m okay with that.

Rhondell desires to be described as a person and works to ensure that everyone is thought of as such, but she acknowledged that gender constructs impact her work. When asked about the way her interactions are different with men versus women, she noted that she finds herself working with more men, and they are intentional about the female-to-male representation on the HOTEL INC board structure:

...because you know we do find that men tend to be way more business minded and sometimes all about the bottom line, the dollar, or this or that, but with women most of the time there is a little bit more of that compassion, and the let’s



look at the picture and let's look at this side of things. So we're very much aware of that even in our own organization, that we all view things differently.

Rhondell remarked that she has heard observations such as, "Rhondell you have to learn better business manners," and was told by a male leader in the community that she lacked the manners of a Southern woman. She explained that she feels individuals are at times "put off" by her direct delivery, but her approach reflects a sense of urgency to make decisions and progress for the people she desires to help. "Not everyone likes it, you know. I think if I were a man I would be called a shrewd businessman. I think as a female I'm looked at differently." Rhondell acknowledged gender challenges in her work, but gives them little time or attention. It would appear that they are simply distractions with which a person who gets things done cannot be bothered.

Mary Duke's experience with gendering was quite different, as would be expected because her wicked problem is directly related to women's rights, and specifically to giving power of birth back to women. When asked, she responded: "I'm a feminist. To me Feminism is advocacy for female equality and I certainly support that." She explained that gender bias is perhaps her largest challenge:

It is very difficult when you have a movement that by many senators and people who work in the LRC have said, "this is one of the largest most well organized grassroots movement we've seen in the Kentucky senate that we can recall." So you have them saying that but then at the same time we show up and 100% of our supporters are women. All but one of them are moms and we get spoken to condescendingly and a lot of it just feels like you're being talked to like "now

ladies let's not get too up in arms here" you know? (laughter) And so it's frustrating.

Mary described an experience in which adversaries claimed false opposition to the bill supporting midwifery:

So we took to Twitter and we were calling them out and we were saying, "hey KMA, KHA these are lies let's get this cleared up." We went to Frankfort yesterday and what are we met with? "Now y'all need to calm down and you need to not get on Twitter like that and you know be careful about this rhetoric." You know, like talking to us in this way ... and do you think anybody went to KMA and KHA and was like "now guys let's be careful." They really were upset with us, and we didn't even get that ugly, you know. It really wasn't that bad. It's just that it's a group of women that they expect to be passive and when we show that we're not gonna be that way I think it's difficult for them to handle. I think it's threatening.

Her mentor, reportedly a self-described "mouthy broad," was characterized by Mary as a powerhouse who has "given absolutely everything she has" to obtain a birth center for Kentucky women:

I really admire her and whenever I start to feel like I can't say the truth, if I start to feel like I know this is the truth but I can't say this right now, or if I'm scared to say it, I always think about Mary C. because she's a very strong woman. And also whenever I think I can't give anymore I think about her.

Mary clearly struggles to find the most effective means of doing gender. She fights for equality and power for women and admires strong women who break gender boundaries.

She acknowledges that challenging cultural norms at times does not work in the favor of the cause, and she struggles with finding a place in which she is comfortable, moving in and out of gender norms depending upon the situation:

And then I will say that there are some leaders that I really like, that I do get good things from, but I see them being a little alarmist and I feel like I've learned from watching them that it helps to keep my reactions at bay sometimes because I see how that can turn some people off.

And I'll say what's really hard for me personally. This is my struggle connected to the gender bias, is that I have to, in order to be effective, I have to not only figure out how to openly get my point across but also not seem threatening to these men and it's frustrating to me that I have to do that dance when they don't have to do that dance. So it's frustrating for me and sometimes I can be very reactive and I have to work on that. As a leader I have to be very careful of that and I'm not perfect and it happens and it bubbles up in me and I just get reactive and then when you go in swinging as a female and in a political arena it just shuts people down, and it is one of the greatest struggles for me because I want ... there are so many days that I want to just say ... can I say fuck?

(Me: Yes, you can say fuck.)

Mary Duke:

Fuck the system, fuck it all, and you know this is my message and I'm not gonna do this dance anymore, and I'm just gonna say what I'm gonna say and that's just how it is. But my experience has shown me that it just doesn't get you anywhere.

While Mary Duke struggles with doing that which she refers to the gender "dance," it appears that Michelle has learned to do it in a way that is personal to her and

to her context. Her approach suggests a gender resistance philosophy, celebrating the differences that men and women possess in character and capability. She made it clear that she and Nathan are a disruptive team; her husband is an elemental stakeholder complementing her strengths and playing a key role in her work. While she embraces the differences between she and her husband, Michelle described a food system dominated by gendered norms that cause her and others to be at a disadvantage in making change:

I have fought very hard to prove to Nathan and to other people, and to work towards other people to understand, that what Nathan does on the farm is no more important than what I do on the farm. Even though it can look like it is. And a lot of people struggle with that. I feel like the food system these days, that farms ended up becoming what benefited a male dominated world... so big farms, with big tractors, and heavy equipment not needing to be connected to the consumer at all. Completely disconnected from the consumer, and so we saw these farmers that had farmed that way struggle to make the change and their wives are sitting there at the table, and this we experienced several times sitting at the table with a husband and wife, and they've made the decision to grow fruits and vegetables and the wife would say, "I think people at our church would buy this, or our neighbors" or so and so, "or this restaurant" and they would not be listened to, and it was all about production, and it was all about inputs and outputs, completely disengaging this new need for a new market.

Michelle's experiences and observations have led her to a mindful strategy regarding gender. Similar to Mary Duke who acknowledges that going in "swinging as a female"

sometimes “shuts people down,” Michelle applies the precautionary principle in her approach, practicing situational discretion when she feels it is appropriate.

Nathan and I are able to work together and we’ve learned that in some situations it’s better for Nathan to be the spokesperson and in some situations it’s better for me. I struggle with that a little bit because not everybody has that luxury, that ability to work in that way. You know, sometimes it’s the right place to stand up for equality and a women’s right to be heard and sometimes when you’re looking at those little obstacles it’s not the right place for that to be the message. But sometimes it is, and there’s definitely been a lot of work that I’ve had to do to prove myself. I would say as a woman, and this is something I’m working on, but in the beginning it very much felt like I had to work much harder than if I had been a man to prove myself. And in some ways it was a good thing because I was very unassuming so there was a lot of people in positions with power that if I had been a man probably would have gotten rid of me, or done whatever they could to hold me down sooner, had I been a man. I think they very much underestimated what I was able to get accomplished as a woman with very simple messages to provide opportunity for people. But I definitely think that as a woman that’s a struggle.

It is important to note Michelle’s use of the word “unassuming” to describe herself, as she does so often. However, when I first heard her do so, she was explaining that someone else had described her as such, and she appeared to be offended, or at least uncomfortable with the descriptor. Perhaps it is because the context was a conversation she had with someone who expressed surprise that she held a leadership position because

of her unassuming nature. Since then, Michelle has changed her thoughts about the word, using it now to describe herself as in the preceding passage. She indicated that her friends use it to describe her in a positive way “because of my laid back grammar and unprofessional way of communicating.” She added that, “Interestingly, most people start calling me unassuming once I’ve proven myself or surprised them with success.” The term “unassuming” and Michelle’s use of it offer a deeper view of her leadership style and differentiate her from the other leaders in this study. Michelle often chooses to do her work behind the scenes, “leading other leaders” and being “intentionally not a boss.” Essentially, she has embraced the characteristic of being unassuming as an effective leadership strategy and style; and for her, the characteristic is strongly associated with gender.

Each woman’s experience with, and response to gender challenge represent an opportunity to confront cultural hegemony regarding gender. While each falls in a different place on the spectrum of philosophy and approach to gender, they all disrupt ingrained assumptions regarding behavior and action.

**The personal costs of disruptive leadership.** When individuals act outside cultural norms, their character and motives often are called into question by those made uncomfortable by such behavior. This has been the experience to some degree for each woman. Social and personal costs of disruptive leadership exist. As each woman discussed these costs, it is important to include them in this narrative analysis.

During our interview, Rhondell commented that she has lost many friendships over the past four years. When asked whether it was due to her inability to commit time to them, she explained that her work makes people feel guilty: “So, a lot of my friends

would say, ‘you know, I’m just not there... I just can’t have empathy or sympathy’ and they just felt guilty to even be associated with me anymore, which was very hard.”

Similarly, Mary Duke described those in her life who do not understand her work, or the reason it is important to her:

It’s not an easy thing to kind of wrap your head around, and I think a lot of times people don’t even want to think about it. It’s kind of a heavy topic when you really get into it. So I definitely have a lot of people who don’t fully understand the impact of it but it’s nice for me to have, not even just locally, but, like being able to go and speak with people all over the country who are doing what I’m doing and talking to them, and it’s just nice to be able every once in awhile pull into that group and be kind of surrounded by people who understand it.

Michelle Howell also described losing friends and family as a result of her work: “I’m sure that I lost friends. I know I’ve lost friends. Family members kind of think I’m the crazy person on different things.” She explained that her motives for advocating for local food and local farmers were questioned as being self-serving, and at times she was viewed as being “better than them now” or “special” due to her notoriety as a community leader in the local food movement. This may in part explain her surprise at being described as “unassuming.”

Challenging previously unquestioned cultural constructs is uncomfortable. The leaders in this study appeared to draw fortitude from their capacity for disruptive wonder, reconstructing a reality that is sufficiently compelling to carry them through the challenges of solving wicked problems. While others in their circles are unable to see the invisible or envision the alternatives, many are able to do so. Disruptive leaders place

their energy, in those most likely positioned to share their insight and their vision. This is perhaps the most fundamental strategy used by disruptive leaders in approaching and solving wicked problems, the fourth theme in the narrative analysis.

### **Facing Wicked Problems**

This narrative analysis concludes with discussion of the fourth theme that emerged from this study of disruptive leaders, the use of innovative and effective strategies to solve a wicked problem. As previously stated, this theme does not stand independently of the others: capacity for disruptive wonder, disruption of existing power structures, and challenging hegemony. They are interrelated in multi-directional cause-and-effect mechanisms that are difficult to outline or to discuss in linear narrative.

Disruptive wonder allows individuals similar to the participants in this study to view wicked problems in new and different ways, deconstructing the various elements that are the roots and reasons for their perpetuation. These issues often are difficult to see and to understand in such a way, as they are buried in cultural hegemony that often goes unexamined as an accepted status quo. The very act of questioning the status quo is a disruption of existing power structures, and acting upon the unsatisfactory answers to these questions is a further act of disruption. What are those actions that lead to change? When a wicked problem becomes visible to a would-be disruptive leader, in what way does she then work toward and achieve a vision of a better alternative? At what point does she transition from a disruptive citizen to a disruptive leader? I propose that disruptive leadership begins when an individual engages others in the process of solving a wicked problem. The identification, deconstruction, and conceptualization of a solution



are capacities of disruptive leaders; the creation of an emergent community of individuals working to solve it is a strategy.

Upon asking Mary Duke at which point she realized she was a leader, she recalled the story of a transition from a disparate group of women working hard but making little impact to the creation of an emergent community with the power to make big change:

There were all these really capable wonderful women but there was something missing. The pieces just weren't going together and that's when I was just like okay, we're bringing this community together. I knew I was going to start My Sunshine Birth Services but I didn't know it was going to be a network. And then I decided: this is going to be a network, and I want everyone to get on board. And when I told everybody about it they could have been like "Yeah, no, we're not gonna do that" but everybody was for it. Everybody came together, everybody trusted me with it, and when they did that I guess that was the moment when I was like: okay I'm officially a leader.

Michelle Howell also described her role as a leader and connector of dots:

So I see a dot over there and a dot over here and they need to be connected, and it might take me a month, it might take me ten years, but I'll try to connect them. A lot of times it looks like up and down to connect them, it's not a straight line like you want it to be.

The recognition that all stakeholders must be included in solving problems and changing the status quo is evident in the work of these women, and examples of their relational approach as a fundamental strategy are found in almost every description of the

work they do. When Michelle spoke of her work in changing the school food system, a primary element was the inclusion of those essential to success:

There's some barriers that have to be overcome and ... barriers are relational. They're the people who work in the front lines at the schools and you can't just go in and tell them what to do. That's not a solution. It takes people like me and Nathan, who are willing to figure out what the obstacles are and be relational and overcome those small barriers that other people in other positions don't have the time to nurture.

The description of being relational and building emergent operating systems as a strategy may be superficial. Creating connections with others is a profound value for these leaders. This concept is beautifully illustrated in a blog post by Michelle Howell on October 19, 2015, entitled "Thoughts on Surviving – What if life is more than simply 'staying safe'?" She pondered the questions of the purpose of survival and satisfaction with life:

Maybe it's not our own survival that we are most motivated by, but rather the place in which we end and someone else begins. Suppose that it's in that space of connection that real life happens. That's where the spark of life that fuels us in all the mundane and monotonous acts of life. Could that be where our most significant work finds its beginning? The work that not only matters today, but tomorrow and throughout eternity.

This value of cultivating connections with others is observable not only in the work they do, but in the lives they live. Michelle's daughters are building their own webs

of inclusion, working within the network that Michelle and Nathan have developed as legitimate stakeholders:

Lilah and I are loaded up and heading to Owensboro for the Kentucky Public Health Conference where I'll share personal experiences that have lead to pathways of collaboration between farmers and public health. Honored. Humbled. Telling my girl this morning that listening to what those who work on the front lines know opens up my opinions to ensure my work remains inclusive and relevant.

#kpha2016 #kpha #kentuckyproud#localfoodforeveryone #mama #farmer

(Facebook post on April 13, 2016 by Michelle Howell. Facebook identity: Need More Acres Farm.)

During the interview, Rhondell shared an observation about society at present, revealing the root of many interconnected wicked problems:

I think what we really, really see anymore is that we've lost the art of conversation. And, you know, whether you and I agree on things about sustainability practices we should still be able to converse about it and not go away with this bitter attitude, but we've lost that. I really feel that we've lost the art of conversation and saying, "well why do you think you feel that way?" and what it's like to be different. I just feel like we've become intimidated by conversation.

The conversation regarding intimidation as described by Rhondell is in itself a wicked problem - a result of the tension increasingly felt as society becomes a global community of humans with extremely differing perspectives (Thomas, 2006). Rhondell

seeks to expand the definition of diversity, a challenge of immense magnitude for leaders of the future but fundamental to the task of solving wicked problems that affect a plurality of stakeholders:

It takes all of us, and one thing I never want HOTEL INC to be is a silo. In our community we do have organizations that silo themselves. We can't be successful in our work if we are a silo. We can't do it alone. I can't do it alone. I have a very large village and I need that village, and I hope that village needs me.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

This study explored the process of leadership demonstrated by three women in south central Kentucky as a unique model of leadership, disruptive leadership. Using grounded theory methodology, answers were sought to the following research questions: (1) What does it mean to be a disruptive leader?; (2) What are the central concerns of leaders facing wicked problems?; (3) What motivates leaders to solve such problems?; (4) What strategies are employed to address such problems?; and (5) How can disruptive leadership be distinguished from leadership styles that share similar traits, such as transformational, servant, or authentic leadership? Data sources that included semi-structured interviews, review of participants' written narrative in blogs and social media, and field observations were analyzed for emergent themes to answer the research questions and to provide some foundation for the construct of a theory of disruptive leadership.

This chapter contains a discussion of the study based on the conclusion that the participants, three citizen leaders in south central Kentucky, demonstrate in some significant way leadership that is distinct from existing models and theories. The research questions are revisited to determine the answers that provided by the methodology, data, and analysis. This is followed by a discussion of the emergent themes and the way in which they may support a new theory of leadership and lend to the construct of disruptive leadership. The question of the reason the outcomes of this study are important is then considered. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

## **The Research Questions**

The data obtained from the narratives of three disruptive leaders provided answers to the research questions. The answers are compelling and often surprising and lend to an understanding of disruptive leadership. Each is addressed briefly. However, the discussion of the emergent themes that follows provides a deeper and broader exploration of disruptive leadership that more appropriately answers the research questions.

### **What does it mean to be a disruptive leader?**

This question is best answered by the themes that emerged. Disruptive leaders possess the capacity for disruptive wonder, a concept described by Anderson (2011) as the ability to deconstruct an existing norm and to examine the elements to determine that which is broken and, consequently, a better way to rebuild a functional system or structure. This often means disrupting existing power structures to redistribute power and to encourage inclusivity. Consequently, these leaders disrupt conventional models of leadership, leading not from the top down as in command control operating systems, but rather through emergent operating systems. They do not seek recognition as leaders, nor do they seek to gain power. Rather, they are content to work behind the scenes, empowering others to become agents of change and potentially fellow citizen leaders. None of the participants began their journey with the objective of becoming a leader; their intent was to solve a wicked problem. They do so by challenging the existing cultural hegemonies that fail to serve communities through concentration of power and the marginalization of stakeholders. Personal experiences in their life stories allowed them to view the problems in a unique way and motivated them to make change. In the process of developing solutions, they emerged as citizen leaders, influencing others with

nothing more than a creative vision of that which is different and better, and the personal conviction that the vision can be realized. Their visions were not created in a vacuum; they were developed through interaction with a diversity of stakeholders who provided insights, experiences, and ideas.

### **What are the central concerns of leaders facing wicked problems?**

The disruptive leaders in this study did not seek to make incremental change within existing social systems. They understood that wicked problems must be approached differently. These issues are considered unsolvable due in part to their complexity, the plurality of stakeholders with sometimes opposing interests, and their connectedness with other wicked problems. Furthermore, they are embedded in cultural hegemony. These leaders needed to understand the deep roots of such problems and the long and complicated history that brought them into existence. As they spoke about their work, each described a course of events, over decades, that led to the current unsatisfactory status quo. They have spent considerable time unpacking a wicked problem to understand the underlying causes and effects. Through exposing and examining these roots, they began to develop practical and impactful ideas for solutions. In the course of this work, these leaders became aware of the importance of placing power back into the hands of those most impacted by wicked problems, giving them freedom to make choices that lead to better lives. These freedoms are the result of inclusivity in planning and decision making, removal of barriers to self-empowerment, and the attainment of knowledge to make informed choices.

### **What motivates leaders to solve such problems?**

The women in this study described a personal life story that led them to identify a wicked problem in need of a solution. They explained that while they were unsure as to the reason, they knew they were the one to do it. Their motivation resulted from a combination of three essential and interrelated characteristics: personal core values, the capacity to identify a wicked problem, and a sense of efficacy in addressing it. Through unique life experiences, each developed personal core values related to marginalization, sense of powerlessness, lack of personal choice and freedom, and other similar social injustices. These experiences prepared and motivated them to recognize and to solve wicked problems close to their hearts. Additionally, they possessed the capacity for disruptive wonder, the ability to see the elements of the problem - the roots, connections, and relevant stakeholders - and to envision an alternative scenario. The ability to see a problem and imagine a compelling solution is an effective motivator. An individual rarely encounters that which is broken and thinks, "I can fix that!" and then walks away. Rather, they feel compelled to fix it because they know they can. Each woman in this study found broken things - broken systems that lead to broken lives - and declared, "I can fix that!" With vision and personal conviction, they are solving problems that have had and continue to have implications for them and for those they care about.

### **What strategies are employed to address these problems?**

The elemental strategy employed by these leaders is the development of an understanding of the wicked problem. It is inadequate to declare "this is a wicked problem." If one is to solve it, it is essential to gain understanding of its history, complexity, interconnections with other problems, and the stakeholders. Disruptive



leaders do their homework. They seek to find the reason for the problem and its persistence. This knowledge prepares them to strategize in an informed way. Many examples exist of uninformed attempts to solve problems. The story of the aid organization that delivered laptops to the remote Peruvian village comes to mind. The effort was unsuccessful due to a failure to develop a full understanding of the problem. Personal insight is helpful, but these leaders seek the perspectives of all stakeholders, as wicked problems affect them in different ways. They extend this inclusivity to the creative development of solutions, developing a web of inclusion that reallocates formerly concentrated power and responsibility more broadly and benefits from a collective of talents, skills, knowledge, and ideas. Rather than identifying the plurality of perspectives as a prohibitive factor in solving a wicked problem, disruptive leaders choose to engage this plurality as a strategic strength.

**How can disruptive leadership be distinguished from leadership styles that share similar traits, such as transformational, servant, and authentic?**

Disruptive leaders demonstrate characteristics of transformational, servant, and authentic leaders; they authentically lead from their core values, they desire to serve others with empathy and humility, they answer a calling, and they possess the ability to appeal to others' moral values and to inspire them to higher engagement. However, several significant characteristics make them distinct. They lead from no formal position of authority, not for the sake of leading but emerging as leaders in their determination to disrupt an unsatisfactory status quo. They possess the competencies to identify and to understand wicked problems, and they are able to develop a vision for an alternative and a strategy for realization of that vision. Encouraging an emergent organizational structure

(whether formal or informal), these leaders disperse power and engage others in a web of inclusion. Disruptive leaders possess the competencies described by Senge (2006), Alexander (2006), and others as crucial for leaders of the future - systems intelligence; social ingenuity; and openness of heart, mind, and will. These competencies are examined more thoroughly in the next section that explores the themes that emerged from the data.

### **The Themes**

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' spoken and written narratives that provide a construct for a theory of disruptive leadership. These themes describe the ways in which disruptive leaders are distinct from other types of leaders and present foundational elements of disruptive leadership.

#### **Theme One: Each leader possesses the capacity for disruptive wonder.**

Alexander (2011) described disruptive wonder as the ability to see when order does not deserve respect because it lacks meaning, justice, or logic and, upon that realization becoming creative, deconstructing order and reorganizing it in a way that is better. This ability is similarly described by Senge (2006) as systems intelligence which is the ability to see patterns of interdependency, that allows one to be able to see the forces driving the system and, ultimately, the direction it is headed if the status quo is maintained. Homer-Dixon (2000) described a similar skill, social ingenuity, helps individuals solve the problems of the social world. "It helps us arrange our economic, political, and social affairs and design our public and private institutions to achieve the level and kind of well-being we want" (Homer-Dixon, 2000, p. 22). Whether referred to as disruptive wonder, systems intelligence, or social ingenuity, the ability to understand

complex and interconnected social systems and structures equips one with the capacity to view and to solve wicked problems. The ability to see through the cultural hegemonies that perpetuate these problems (even if only by making them invisible to most), and to face them with conviction that they are solvable is a distinct competency of the disruptive leader.

The unanswered question involves the means by which certain individuals gain or develop the capacity for disruptive wonder. This research suggests that life experience may be a contributing factor. Each woman described a series of significant events in the life story that led to her ultimate motivation to address a problem she identified and could not accept. As beautifully described by Wheatley and Frieze (2011), these women looked reality in the eye and their hearts were opened by what they saw. For each, the view was disturbing and heartbreaking but, through the experience, they gained courage and a relentless yearning to arrive at a solution. However, life experience cannot fully explain the capacity to identify and to solve wicked problems. Many individuals experience life events that expose them to heartbreaking realities about the social realm. Only a few become motivated and determined to change the status quo. Perhaps the present question is: Are disruptive wonderers born or made?

**Theme Two: Each leader is engaged in the disruption of existing power structure and distribution.**

By the very fact that they lead from positions of non-authority, the leaders in this study are disrupting existing power structures. As citizen leaders, they work from the places in, and positions from, which they reside as mothers, farmers, friends, caregivers, planners, community organizers, consumers, and various other roles. In building a

network of engaged and empowered stakeholders, they seek out those who have been marginalized (but often are the most negatively impacted by the existing status quo), encouraging them in the process of developing solutions. They create partnerships with allies that are surprising yet logical. They unify a diverse group of individuals and organizations by identifying discrete goals that share a common thread. The connections between each of these women demonstrates this point, as they regularly collaborate on ideas that serve multiple objectives. Each seeks to solve a seemingly distinct wicked problem. However birth, family planning, poverty, food insecurity, nutrition, local economics, health, education, and other such social factors are interrelated and connect stakeholders in endless ways. It appears to be more than reasonable to propose that presently disconnected entities, from the local health department to the Agricultural Extension Office to the regional community college to local farmers should collaborate because their missions are interdependent. These leaders identify the missing links and encourage those collaborations. The complex interconnectedness that lends to the wickedness of some problems also may present opportunity if this web is used to build a system that results in community strength and resilience.

**Theme Three: In the process of disruptive wonder each leader is challenging hegemony.**

The disruptive leaders in this study have determined that certain orders do not deserve respect. “Order” essentially represents the various cultural hegemonies, ideas that are accepted passively and that control one’s actions. Often individuals agree to order without understanding that which they agree to. Cultural, religious, and political hegemonies at times do not serve individuals as citizens or communities. They may harm

them in both obvious and obscure ways. Essentially, they concentrate power in the hands of a few and eliminate the free will of most. The way in which the birth system has been ordered removes power from mothers and puts it in the hands of the medical establishment. The way in which the food system has been ordered limits access to healthy nutritious foods and creates economic barriers for small farmers. The order of the system for responding to the homelessness and impoverished dehumanizes people and makes them invisible. These orders do not deserve respect, and the disruptive leaders not only view them as wicked problems, but they challenge them with ideas for that which is better.

Challenging hegemony is incredibly difficult work. The disruptive leaders engaged in such tasks are admirably audacious yet they demonstrate quiet humility, preferring to accomplish the work behind the scenes and empowering others and employing practical and creative strategies for change. As such, the women described those most impacted by their work as other citizen leaders also wishing to disrupt a status quo but in need of inspiration, encouragement, and ideas for ways to proceed. The women in this study lean on one another for comfort on the most difficult days. They described moments of self-doubt, loss of friendships, and sacrifice of self as a result of their work. Vulnerability and risk are inescapable consequences of challenging cultural hegemonies. These disruptive leaders believe the personal costs are worth the collective gain.

**Theme Four: Each leader is using innovative and effective strategies to solve a wicked problem.**

How does one disrupt the status quo? These citizen leaders understand the wicked problems they seek to solve and have clear visions of the alternative. Despite this, the task at hand is seemingly insurmountable, given the challenges they face. They work to change entire social systems interconnected with and embedded in other systems. Through the cultivation of relationships and the empowerment of the disenfranchised, these leaders disrupt cultural hegemonies. They pay little attention to the corporate and political powers that created the wicked problems, rather, placing their attention on people power. This attention is well placed, creating cracks in the very foundation upon which the order was built. If hegemony can be compared to an agreement in which the individual who agrees does not understand to what they are agreeing, perhaps the most appropriate method to challenge hegemony is to provide that individual with an understanding. The strategy of the disruptive leader is to make visible to others that which they often cannot see; to reveal the thing that is broken and to engage all of the right persons in the process of repair.

The leaders in this study do not seek to influence followers. They empower other potential citizen leaders. The concepts of trans-local learning and scaling across, introduced by Wheatley and Frieze (2011), help to describe this process. Scaling across is an alternative to the idea of scaling up - a one-size-fits-all replication approach. Scaling across occurs when an idea is carried from one place to another. However, the idea is not replicated but, rather, is allowed to emerge as something different, yet appropriate to the new place. Natural evolution provides an example of this with the concept of adaptation,

a process by which a species evolves to better fit within the changing environment.

Trans-local learning occurs when ideas carried from one setting to another are allowed to evolve in a way that maximizes functionality in the new setting. An idea applied in one community may not work well in another, but the process of experiment and discovery inspires others to make adaptations and adjustments that may lead to something different and better. The leaders in this study identified other leaders as those most impacted by their work. I believe this to be the result of scaling across and trans-local learning.

The strategies these leaders utilize to solve wicked problems can be summarized in two words: emergent leadership. By engaging and empowering others, they tap into unlimited resources of energy, creativity, talent, and other capabilities, competencies, and synergies without boundaries.

### **Implications**

Disruptive leaders develop within a specific context in response to a particular problem. They do not simply exist, searching for wicked problems to solve or unacceptable status quo to disrupt. Individuals, through life experiences, bear witness to an order that does not deserve their respect. They begin to question hegemony, unpacking its various components, and they possess the capacity to envision a preferable alternative and to develop a strategy for realizing that vision. They engage the relevant stakeholders, the plurality often marginalized in such decision making, while most impacted and most essential to the outcome. In the process of doing so, they emerge as citizen leaders.

Contemporary leadership scholars increasingly call for “greater maturity (in leadership research, practice and development) that acknowledges that leadership is played out in complex, dynamic, and changing social systems” (Middlehurst, 2008, p. 322). Disruptive

leadership is just that, and the leaders in this study have revealed important insights into the development of disruptive leaders, as well as the characteristics and capacities that make them unique. Additionally, knowledge has been gained regarding effective approaches and strategies they utilize in solving wicked problems. This understanding of disruptive leadership reveals a new type of leader who is capable of leading in this new age, and into a future in which the only certainty is that the problems will become increasingly complicated and will require special skills and competencies of leadership.

### **Limitations and Researcher Reflection**

As discussed in the limitations and delimitations section of Chapter III, the primary limitation of this study was researcher subjectivity. As stated, this is a fundamental element of grounded theory research. The goal was to discover and to illuminate emergent themes that support the criterion of pragmatism, practical adequacy, and plausibility as suggested by Kempster and Parry (2011). However, it should be noted that, upon reflection of knowledge gained through this research and particularly the emergent themes that have offered insight into disruptive leadership, the interview questions could have been designed to better serve the study. While this was unknown when the interviews were conducted, the realization emerged that different and additional questions could have been asked of the participants to potentially add to the depth and richness of the study, as well as to further support the emergent themes. Perhaps this is simply the nature of such research; it is a process of continuous exploration through which one continues to gain knowledge and understanding upon which to build a robust theory. Certainly this study has led to more questions than answers, some of which are discussed in the next section describing suggestions for further research.



### **Suggestions for Practice and Research**

Studies of disruptive leadership are limited, and grounded theory studies of disruptive leadership were unable to be found in the published literature. This study revealed four themes that offer compelling possibilities for further study of disruptive leadership and that offer a potential starting point for a theory. It is reasonable to state that the conclusions of this study meet the criteria of pragmatism, practical adequacy, and plausibility suggested by Kempster and Parry (2011) within the context from which they have been drawn. However, a model of disruptive leadership can be further developed and strengthened only with additional research to determine whether the themes that emerged are purely contextual or can be identified in other examples of disruptive leadership.

To build upon this foundation, further research could explore the following:

1. This study was limited to a single geographic location and one community. The identification and study of citizen leaders who seek to solve wicked problems in other communities or geographic locations would help to answer the following questions: (a) Are other citizen leaders developing and approaching problem solving in the same ways?; and (b) Are they disrupting power structures and practicing emergent leadership to challenge hegemony?
2. The subjects of this study were female and of similar ethnicity, educational level, and socio-economic status. Further research to explore disruptive leadership practice by individuals who represent various dimensions of diversity may reveal whether disruptive leader development, motivations, and strategies could be influenced by factors such as gender or cultural background.

3. This study revealed the significance of personal core values and sense of efficacy in determining one's success as a disruptive leader. Further research focused on these factors could explore the extent to which they are determinants of success. Could an individual practice disruptive leadership in absence of the motivating factors of core value and sense of efficacy? Are life story and pivotal trigger events essential to disruptive leadership?
4. Leadership theory, development and practice are subjects of intense interest, with reports of leadership articles that were published at a rate of 10 per day in the 1990s (Ford, 2005). A Google Scholar search using the term leadership provides more than one million published articles subsequent to 2000. Leadership programs of study in higher education, and leadership development programs provided by various for-profit and nonprofit organizations seek to assist future leaders in their development. Participants in this study developed as leaders not through any formal program, but through experience in complex social systems. Further analysis of the factors that contributed to their self development as leaders would be of value to those tasked with preparing future leaders, as well as future leaders interested in personal development.

Certainly many other avenues of inquiry could be explored to further understand the phenomenon of disruptive leadership. The previous examples reflect the immediate questions that arose in the course of this research. If this study can be compared to a mosaic, a picture comprised of pieces of tile that represent the findings, and the spaces between are areas that remain unexamined, the tiles inspire as many questions as the gaps.

## **Summary**

A formal definition or theory of disruptive leadership continues to be elusive. However, it is unnecessary in order to identify and to apply lessons for leadership practice learned from the women in this study. The concepts of disruptive wonder and questioning order offer inspiration for those unsettled by the wicked problems they observe. The practices of inclusivity and citizen leadership provide strategic applications for those inclined to lead positionally. While it is hoped that this study finds an audience of leadership scholars and practitioners who are able to build upon it to develop a new theory of disruptive leadership, the effort is not lost if an audience is not found. A great deal has been learned about leadership from these women. Through this study, I believe they have discovered much about themselves and one another. If that is the extent of what is gained through the experience, it is sufficient. The personal growth of four disruptive leaders is not a trivial outcome. If anything is to be learned from this study, it is that disruptive leaders do not hoard their strength, guarding it as a super power. Rather, they pass it on to others, empowering a web of citizen leaders who collectively possess the power to change the world.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Describe the work you are doing to affect change in your community.
2. Why is this work important?
3. Who most understands the impact of your work?
4. What are your biggest obstacles/challenges?
5. What are your strategies for overcoming these challenges?
6. What encourages/motivates you to continue?
7. How are your efforts sustained or supported?
8. How have leadership examples or actions by other leaders influenced the way that you approach your work in affecting change?
9. Describe a moment or experience when you realized your capacity to lead or empower others in sharing your vision of change.
10. What is your long-term goal or vision, and what will you do when you have achieved it?

Follow-up question asked via email communication:

Do you identify as a feminist?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **IRB Approval**

#### **Informed Consent**

##### **Study of How Three Kentucky Women are Leading Change**

**Investigator:** Christian Ryan, WKU Educational Leadership Doctoral Candidate, 270-791-1131

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this research dissertation is to examine and understand a unique type of leadership demonstrated by three women in south- central Kentucky. This study will use a grounded theory approach to explore why and how the participants are negotiating their social structures to disrupt dysfunctional status quo and implement positive alternatives that better serve their communities. Ultimately, findings may lead to the development of a new theory of leadership: disruptive leadership.

2. **Explanation of Procedures:**

The investigator will collect qualitative data from each participant in three primary ways:

1. Through face-to-face interviews using open-ended questions to gain understanding of each participant's experiences as citizen leaders and agents of change. The initial interview is expected to be one hour in duration. If necessary, the investigator may request a follow up interview.
2. Through examination of existing written documents, including blogs, published articles, and other written work of the participants.
3. Through field observations of the investigator during meetings or in other situations in which the participant is serving in a leadership role.

Data from each of these sources will be examined for emergent themes that may lend to the construction of a new theory of leadership, distinct from existing theories.

3. **Discomfort and Risks:** There are no perceived discomforts or risks to the participants.

4. **Benefits:** There are no perceived benefits to the participants. The study of these women and the processes and strategies which have led to their success in affecting significant and positive change within their local societal institutions should be documented to advance the positive effect on the community.5.

**Confidentiality:** Participants will be identified by first name in the final dissertation document only with permission. If permission is not granted, the participant will be not be identified by name, however descriptions of each participant's work (profession), position in the community, and life experiences relevant to the research will be described. Transcribed interviews and field notes will be kept securely on the WKU campus for no more than three years.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

*You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.*

- I agree to the audio/video recording of the research interviews. (*Initial here*)  
\_\_\_\_\_

- I agree to allow the researcher to attend relevant public activities or meetings that I host/conduct to observe and take notes for research assessment. (*Initial here*)  
\_\_\_\_\_

- I agree to use of existing documents that I provide, or that are publicly available, by the researcher for research assessment. (*Initial here*) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM  
INDICATES THAT THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED  
AND APPROVED BY  
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW  
BOARD Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator  
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129



WKU IRB# 16-308  
Approval - 2/11/2016  
End Date - 8/31/2016  
Expedited  
Original - 2/11/2016